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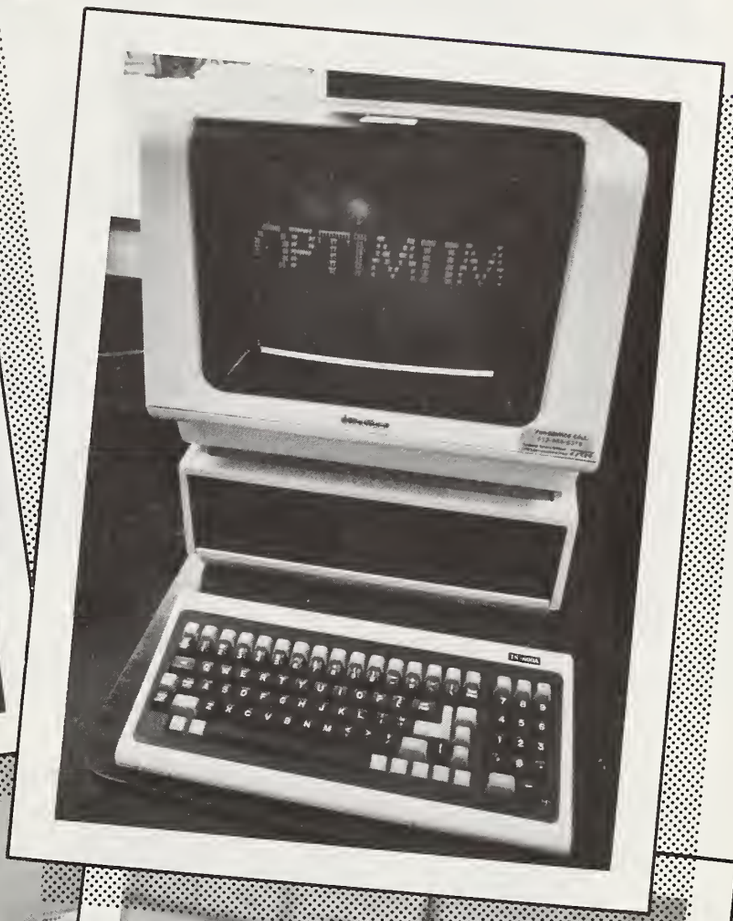
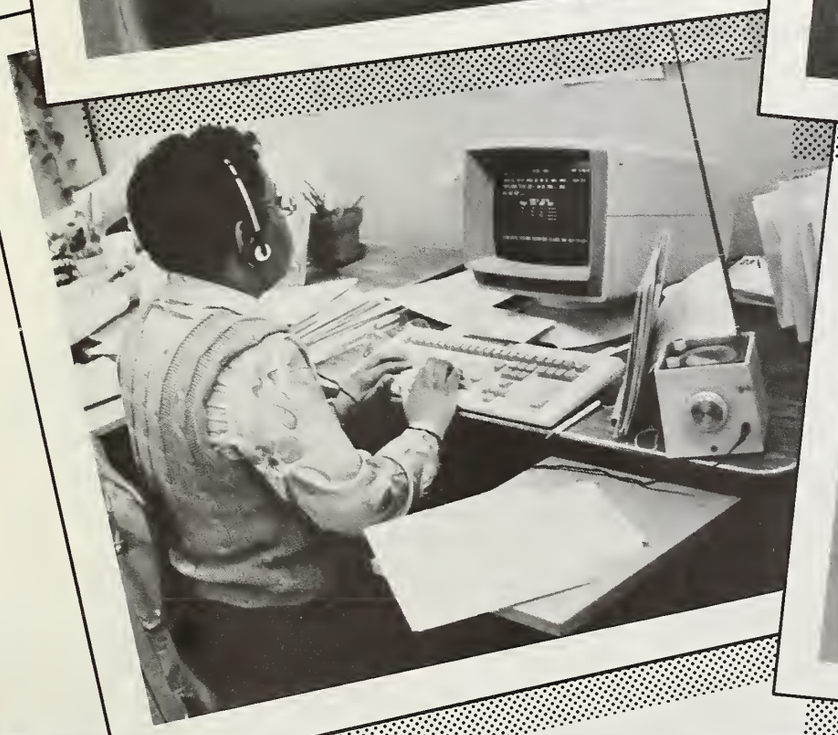




Just about everyone has been touched in some way by the computer revolution, and the people who manage the food assistance programs are no exception. ■ Articles in this issue look at some of the ways food program managers are using computers to improve their programs, save money, and provide better service to people in need of food help.

Automating the Food Stamp Program

In Alaska, information from food stamp applicants is entered directly into a statewide computer system. In Reading, Pennsylvania, food stamp recipients use a plastic debit card instead of paper coupons to purchase groceries. At a Minnesota computer complex, 27 workers process redemption information on 230,000 grocery stores taking part in the program.

Across the country today, automation is changing the face of the Food Stamp Program, presenting opportunities and challenges for food stamp managers at all levels.

"There is no question that as we approach the 21st century, much of the entire food stamp delivery system will be automated," says Joseph Leo, deputy administrator for management at USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). It makes sense, he says, because one of the best applications of computers is keeping track of and analyzing large quantities of data.

"For the Food Stamp Program you're talking in the neighborhood of 20 million people getting monthly benefits. A program serving that size population is a perfect home for the computer," Leo says. "In addition, when you have a time-sensitive process, such as meeting the needs of hungry families, you want to be as responsive as possible."

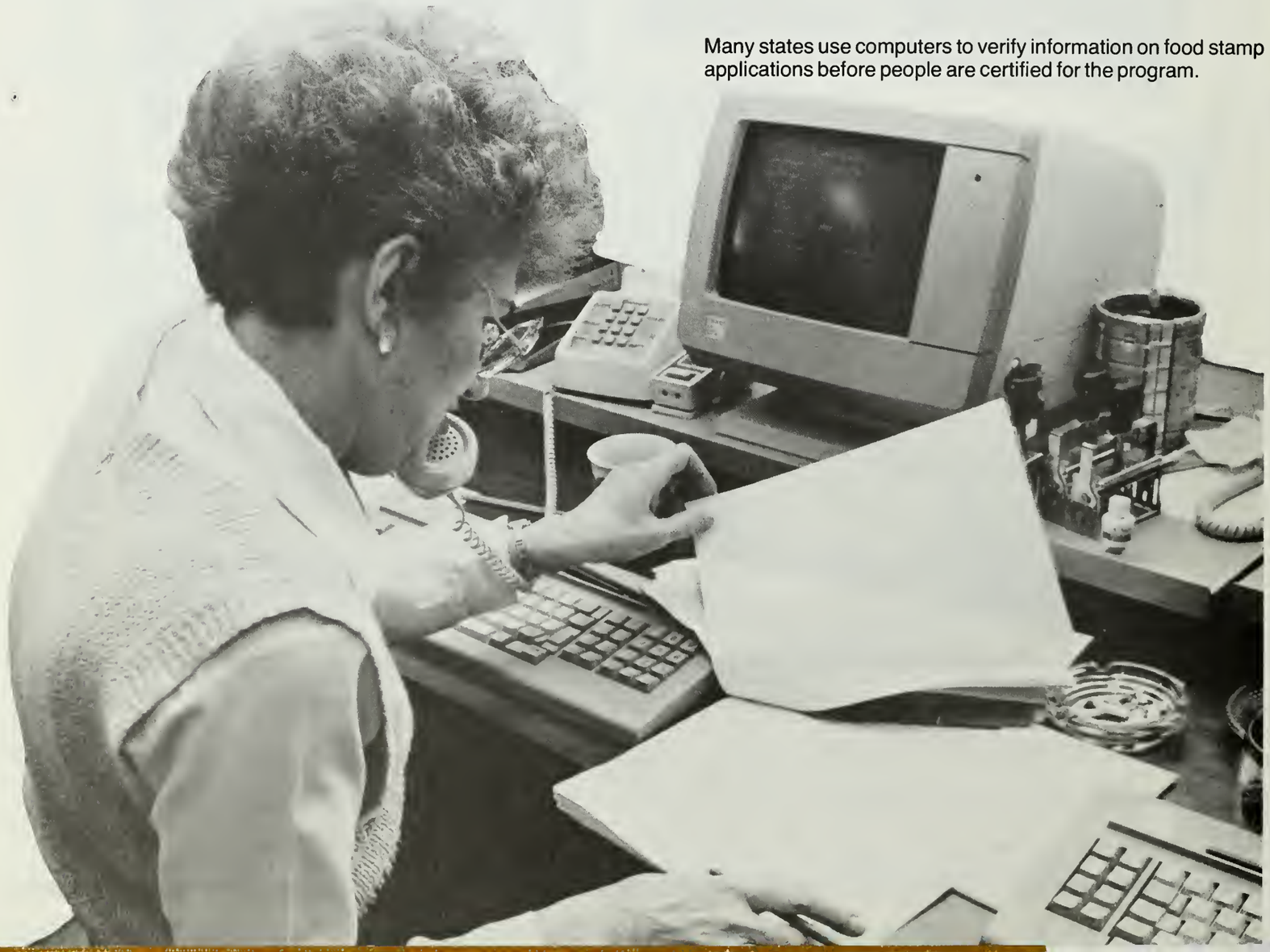
Accountability also important

A multi-billion dollar program also demands accountability. Computers offer tremendous opportunities to streamline benefit delivery systems and improve accountability.

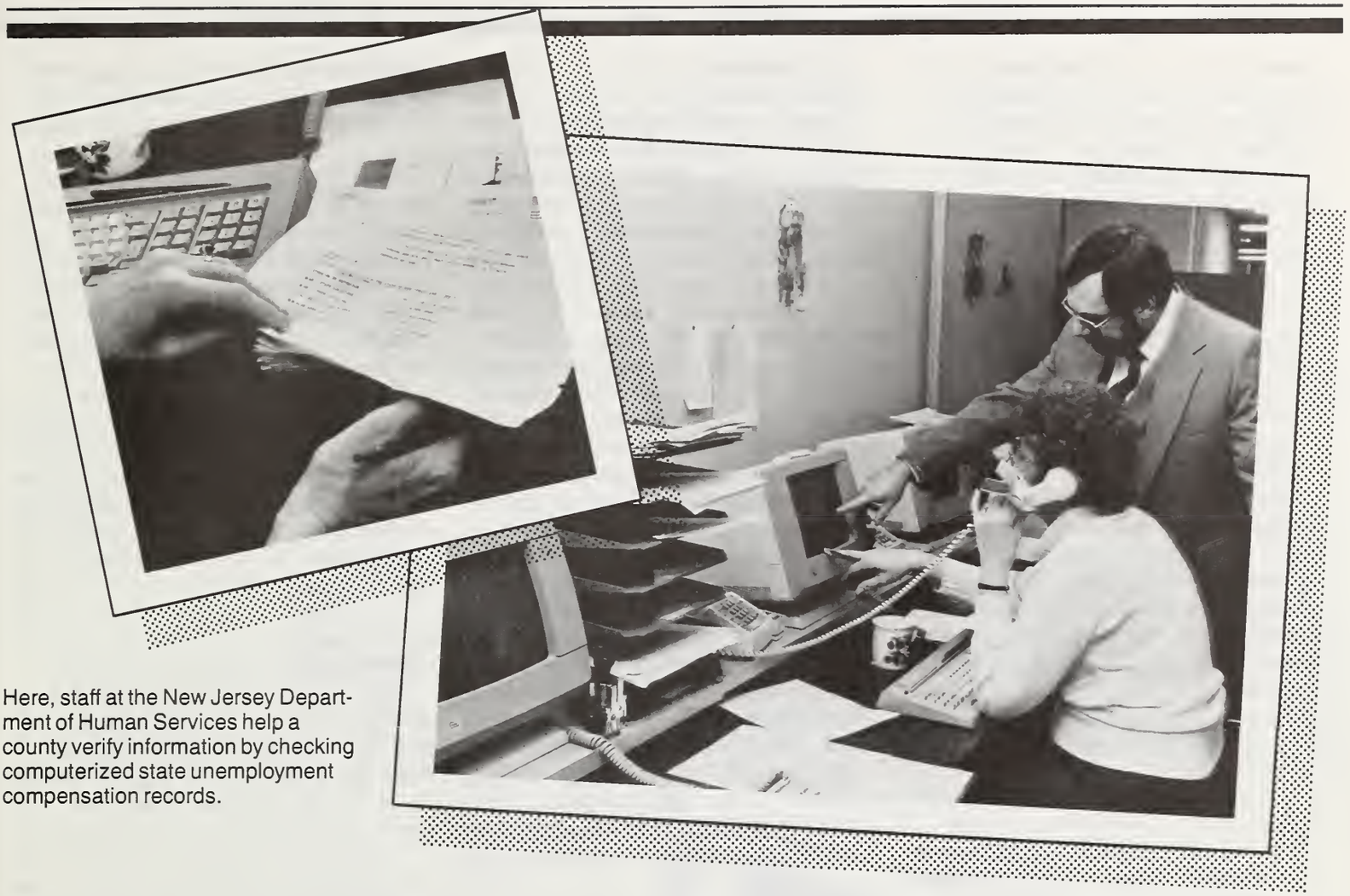
Some states have automated virtually every aspect of the food stamp delivery process—from certification and issuance, to follow-up investigations and claims collections. This has helped cut down on errors, prevent ineligible people from being certified, and track down people who are receiving benefits fraudulently.

At the federal level, FNS is finding new ways to use automation in tracking the 2½ billion food coupons which each year move through retail stores and the banking community. The agency is also using computers with its quality control system, which monitors errors made in a sample of more than 65,000 cases handled in certification and issuance office across the nation.

In time, computers may revolutionize the way FNS and states work together to keep track of program infor-



Many states use computers to verify information on food stamp applications before people are certified for the program.



Here, staff at the New Jersey Department of Human Services help a county verify information by checking computerized state unemployment compensation records.

mation, such as participation and coupons issued. Today, most of this data comes to FNS on paper forms, but the agency is laying the groundwork for receiving this data electronically from the states.

A system like this would relieve the current paradoxical situation where some states take information from their automated systems, enter it onto paper forms, and mail it to FNS—all to have FNS employees key it into the agency's computer system.

"Clearly in the not too distant future the potential for moving all this information is there," Leo says. "What's happened so far is the tip of the iceberg. The changes food program staff will see between now and 1990 will be nothing short of an automation phenomenon they've never seen before."

States encouraged to move ahead

Many state and local agencies have already seen a lot of changes. "Right now all the states have active projects going on to automate their programs," Leo says. "Naturally, some are more advanced than others."

Ironically, some states that got into automation early in the 1970's now are lagging behind with outdated equipment. Others, like Alaska, Vermont, and Texas, have vaulted to the forefront with more recent, state-of-the-art systems.

In the past few years, for example, Texas has automated its client information intake process by installing more than 3,300 computer work stations in its certification offices. Computers guide the eligibility workers through the interview, perform the calculations needed to determine eligibility, calculate the food stamp allotment or AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) grant, and produce a copy of the information for placement in the client's case folder.

To encourage states to automate their programs, FNS provides up to 75-percent enhanced administrative funding for development of computer systems. Once the systems become operational, funding goes back to the standard 50-50 federal-state sharing of administrative costs.

To get enhanced funding, a state first submits a proposal to FNS. FNS regional staff work with the state to make sure the proposal meets program requirements, is cost-effective, and is technologically likely to succeed. Projects involving more than $1 million must be approved by an executive committee at FNS headquarters chaired by Joe Leo.

Sharing information helpful to many

FNS strongly encourages the transfer of successful systems from one state to another when possible. North Dakota, for example, successfully adapted Alaska's advanced computer system with relatively little modification. Such transfers make good fiscal sense because developmental costs for automated state welfare systems can run into many millions of dollars.

The agency also emphasizes the need for states to develop systems that integrate food stamp, AFDC, and Medicaid programs. Where complete integration would not be cost-effective, as perhaps in a small state, FNS insists on an automated link—a system that can communicate with the computers in the other welfare programs in the state—before enhanced funding will be granted.

Many states are taking advantage of FNS automated data processing (ADP) funding. In fiscal year 1984, 27 states received developmental funding at the 75 percent level, and 47

received 50 percent operational funding for ADP. In all, FNS provided more than $40 million for state computer system costs.

In addition to funding, FNS has provided states with technical assistance packages to help them make better use of their systems' capabilities. A recent package outlined the decisions and issues facing states developing automated claims systems. Another package described how states can use automated systems to verify applicants' social security numbers.

FNS has also provided states with a catalog of automated "front-end" verification techniques, which describes strategies for detecting fraud and errors on applications before food stamp benefits are issued. This is in addition to a catalog of program improvement activities, updated and distributed each year, which describes many automated projects in use around the country.

Survey shows various uses

Because of the importance of state and local progress in automation, FNS has established a computer data base that allows the agency to track how the states are doing in applying automated technology to their programs.

According to that survey, about 45 states currently have automated the eligibility and benefit calculation process. In more than half these states, the automated system not only is the sole method of calculating benefits, but goes further and makes the financial eligibility determination for the caseworker.

More than 40 states have automated case record files, and a similar number have automated preparation of some reports and notices such as monthly reports and notices of case actions. More than half the states have integrated databases for food stamps and AFDC.

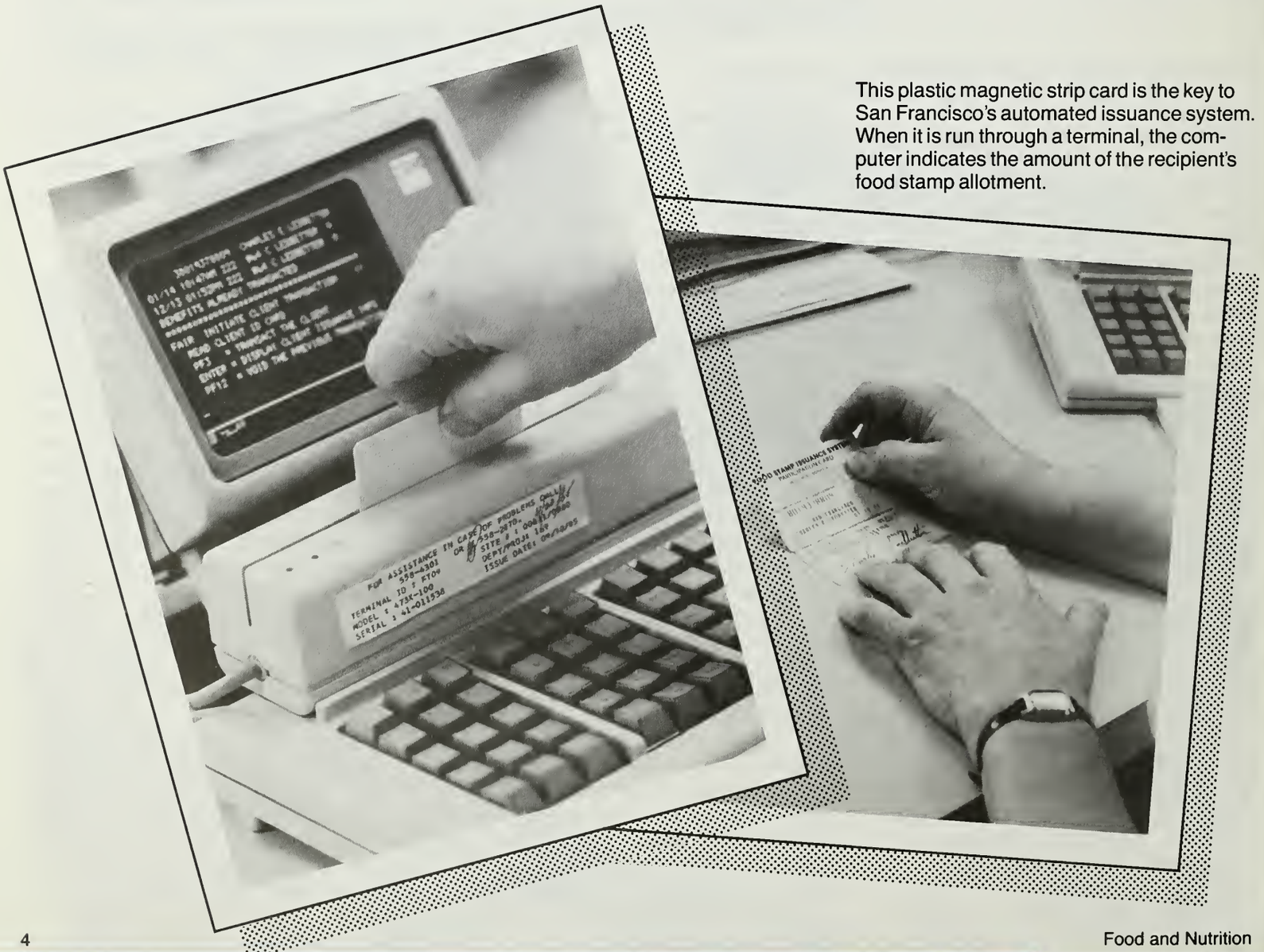
Cross-checking information applicants provide against other sources of data has proven to be a very effective application for computer technology.

About half the states have some degree of automated "front-end" verification systems in operation. Nine of these do immediate on-line matches with state unemployment compensation wage data. Most states also do computerized verification after benefits are authorized.

To follow up on cases involving fraud or error, about 20 states have statewide automated claims tracking systems. Oregon's automated system for tracking and collecting food stamp claims, for instance, has helped the state triple the number of claims established each month.

New delivery systems tried

Most states have automated some part of their issuance systems as well. In some areas, computers generate the authorization-to-participate



This plastic magnetic strip card is the key to San Francisco's automated issuance system. When it is run through a terminal, the computer indicates the amount of the recipient's food stamp allotment.

(ATP) cards. In other instances, automated systems stuff coupons in envelopes sent to issuance sites or print labels for mail issuance.

Ten states use on-line issuance systems, primarily in urban areas. San Francisco's Food Stamp Automated Issuance and Reporting System (FAIR) is typical of these systems, which eliminate the need for ATP cards.

With on-line issuance, recipients get a permanent plastic magnetic strip card which they present at the issuance office. The issuing agent runs the card through a terminal, and the computer indicates the amount of the client's food stamp allotment. The coupons are issued and the transaction is entered into the computer. The system dramatically cuts down on duplicate transactions.

To date, the ultimate automated issuance system is being tested in Reading, Pennsylvania, where the food stamp coupon has been eliminated. Recipients have plastic, magnetic strip cards which they use at the grocery store. The clerk runs the card through a telephone-size terminal on the counter and the recipient punches a secret four-digit number into a hand-held keypad.

Use of the correct number authorizes the transaction. The food purchase is rung up on the cash register, and a central computer debits the recipients' electronic food stamp account and credits the grocer's bank account. No food stamp coupons are used at all.

Pennsylvania will run the Reading project, known as Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT), through early 1988. Preliminary results from the project show that most retailers find the system easier to deal with than the coupons. Like the grocers, three-fourths of the Reading food stamp recipients prefer the electronic system. They like not dealing with the coupon books and not having to go to the bank to exchange an ATP card for coupons.

For USDA, the EBT system offers potential for reducing fraud in the program and for saving the cost of handling and processing billions of food stamp coupons each year. Final evaluation results from the first phase of the project are expected later this year.

More changes in the future

Just how electronic will the future Food Stamp Program be? It is too soon to tell. But trends indicate that in the near future more states will move to on-line issuance systems such as those in use in California and Michigan.

More eligibility workers will be equipped with automated work stations and will enter information provided by applicants directly into computers. Caseload information will be compiled in central data files, but managed by mini- and microcomputers in various locations around the state rather than by large central mainframe units.

USDA will continue to encourage automated systems integrating various welfare programs, increased use of front-end verification to prevent fraud and errors before benefits are issued, and better use of automation in follow-up wage matching to help focus investigative efforts on the most serious cases of fraud and abuse.

This year, for the first time ever, the legislation authorizing the Food Stamp Program sets a specific

schedule for USDA and the states to move ahead in automating program operations.

The Farm Bill, passed in December, calls for USDA to set up and work with a state advisory group on a model plan for automating data processing and computerizing information systems. This plan must be developed and made available for comments by October 1, 1986. USDA has until February 1, 1987 to consider the comments and complete the plan.

Using the model plan as a guide, each state will then develop and submit an individual plan, which will become part of the state's overall plan of operation. States must submit their plans by October 1, 1987.

By April 1, 1988 USDA must submit to Congress an evaluation of the states' plans. This report will include an analysis of any additional steps states must take to make their systems cost-effective and efficient. States must begin putting their plans into effect no later than October 1, 1988.

This means that within 2 years, food stamp managers in every state will have given considerable thought to how they will automate their programs. Automating will become even more of a priority than it already is.

Monitoring efforts greatly improved

Just as FNS is providing enhanced funding to states to improve their automated systems, the agency is investing in improvements at the federal level as well.

The oldest use of automation in the Food Stamp Program nationally has been to monitor the redemption activity of the retail food stores that take part in the program.

The Redemption Certificate Automation Program (RCAP) located in FNS' Minneapolis computer center keeps track of important information on the 230,000 retailers authorized to accept food stamps. This information includes basic identifying information, estimated sales activity, investigative history, and amount of coupon redemptions. RCAP also keeps track of information on food stamp redemptions as they are processed by banks.

One quarterly report the system generates identifies stores that redeem more than $1,000 each month in food stamps and have twice the average redemptions of a group of stores of similar size. These stores are checked out by the FNS field offices to find out why they have unusually high redemption levels. If the field officers find unexplained irregularities, the stores are referred for investigation by FNS compliance officers.

Several recent developments are helping to streamline this process. To enhance the computer screening by the RCAP system, FNS is developing an error-prone profile—a set of selection criteria to enable the computer to better identify stores likely to violate program rules. This profile will help target investigative efforts.

In addition, the 72 FNS field offices recently have been equipped with microcomputers that allow them to access the RCAP system. Field offices can now enter information on newly authorized stores directly into the Minneapolis system, instead of filling out and mailing a form with the information.

Likewise, they can access historical information about stores' redemption patterns to help them in determining which stores should be referred for investigations.

FNS area compliance offices have also recently been equipped with microcomputers. Workers at the six compliance offices can now electronically enter information about stores being investigated into a system known as the Investigative Field Office Activities Reporting System, or IFOARS, which is also housed in Minneapolis.

When a compliance office gets a case for investigation, the data is entered into IFOARS. The system automatically pulls background on the store being investigated from the RCAP system. The IFOARS computer case record is updated continuously as the investigation proceeds. With the new on-line microcomputers, this is being done faster and more efficiently than ever before.

FNS will soon be testing yet another automated link in this system. Starting this summer, two compliance investigators will begin testing the use of portable computer terminals to keep track of their management information. The size of a briefcase, the computers will be equipped with a keyboard and screen, and will be able to transmit information to the area compliance office microcomputer over telephone lines.

The compliance investigators pose as food stamp shoppers in stores suspected of possible violations, such as selling ineligible items, like cigarettes or alcoholic beverages; buying or selling food stamps; or giving unauthorized amounts of cash as change.

With the portable computers, investigators will be able to transmit daily reports with complete information on the inventory of food stamp coupons used and cash change received in their investigations.

Currently, the 50 investigators spend about 10 percent of their time keeping track of the more than $300,000 in coupons they use each year. Other types of reports—such as details of cases worked on, miles driven, and hours worked—will also be easier with the portable units.

Other steps also improve monitoring

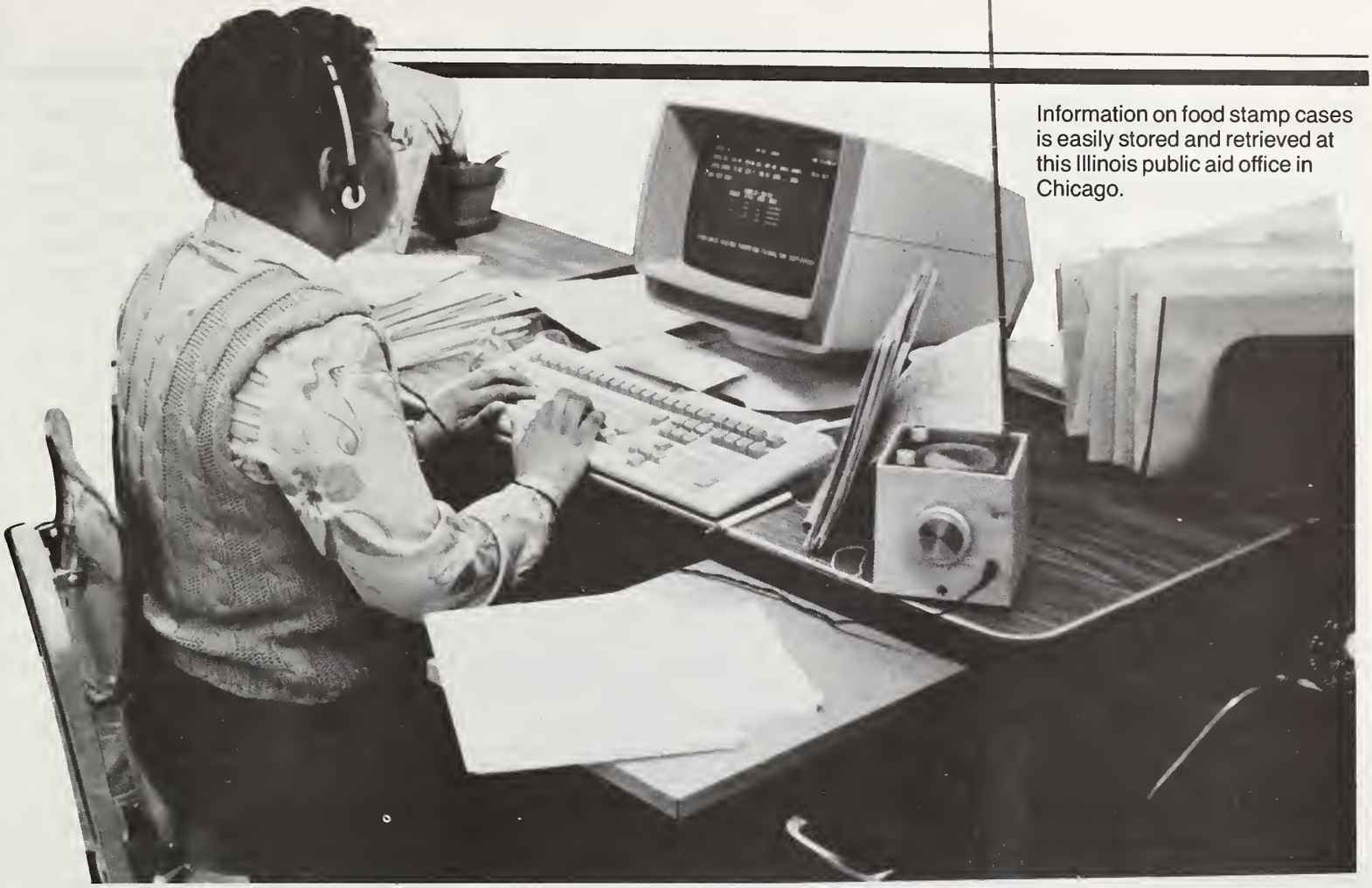
Each year the 230,000 authorized retailers accept about 2½ billion coupons of varying denominations from food stamp participants in exchange for eligible food items. The retailers count and bundle the coupons by denomination in packages of 100 and submit them as part of their regular bank deposit along with a redemption certificate, a form supplied by FNS.

There are about 10,000 financial institutions that accept these deposits and submit them with the redemption certificates and a summary accounting document to one of 37 Federal Reserve banks. About 700,000 forms are used annually to make these transfers.

The Federal Reserve banks count the coupons, pass credits to the financial institutions, check for counterfeit coupons, and destroy the coupons. They, in turn, charge the United States Treasury for coupons redeemed and destroyed, and submit all accounting documents to FNS.

While the coupons are carefully checked by the Federal Reserve banks against the accounting documents submitted by the financial institutions, the amount of the redemption certificates differs from the coupons because of restrictions on how coupons must be bundled for submission.

FNS has improved the accountability of this system through a bank monitoring project developed in 1982 and fully implemented in April 1985. The project changed the redemption



Information on food stamp cases is easily stored and retrieved at this Illinois public aid office in Chicago.

certificate to an easier-to-complete form which could be read by an optical scanner at the Minneapolis computer center. It also changed and improved the flow of paperwork to FNS.

The changes require banks to be stricter about checking the redemption certificates supplied by retailers. This has helped to some extent, says Ray Pugh, deputy administrator for financial management at FNS.

He points out that in fiscal year 1981 banks redeemed $200 million in food stamp coupons that could not be identified with specific retailers. Currently, the gap has dropped to about $40 million. "However," he says, "the system still falls short of being a full-blown accounting system for food stamp redemptions."

To counter that problem, FNS has pulled together a task force made up of seven major banks, the American Bankers Association, the U.S. League of Savings Institutions, the Federal Reserve System, and agency representatives. The task force's goal is to come up with an automated system that would effectively keep track of redemption data and streamline current procedures.

"We are examining approaches that would reduce paper flow, give us an accurate accounting for redemption activity by retailers, cut down the staff workload at the Minneapolis computer center, and apply the technology that is currently available to the government and banking industry," says Pugh.

The task force has carefully documented the redemption process and has considered a number of alternatives for an improved system. The system will be pilot tested and evaluated before being applied on a broad scale.

"While early in the process, the idea has potential for some exciting things," says Pugh. "It's an interim step that fits in between where we are now and a paperless, EBT-like system down the road. It represents something you can do right now to provide a dramatic improvement in food stamp redemption accountability."

Automation is at the forefront

With the agency looking into more sophisticated electronic bank monitoring at the same time it builds an automated network for other kinds of program information, the outlines of Joe Leo's vision of a fully automated electronic flow of information begin to take shape.

"When you look at what our partners in the states are doing in automating, then at what FNS is doing, you can see that automation is clearly at the forefront of our future management of this program," Leo says.

Is it worth the investment in capital to set up an electronic system to run the Food Stamp Program? "I believe unequivocally that automation can return in service and in productivity more than $1.50 to $2.00 for every $1.00 invested," Leo answers.

Automation will not necessarily replace people, he says. It will help them do their jobs better—"working smarter, not harder," as Leo puts it.

"We are always going to need people to make sense out of all this data, to make decisions, to do the interpretation and analysis. Basically, automation frees the worker from mundane bean counting. It extends human capability by providing an electronic tool.

"The agency's mission is to deliver food assistance in an efficient and effective way," Leo says. "The bottom line is that today you really can't do that without automation."

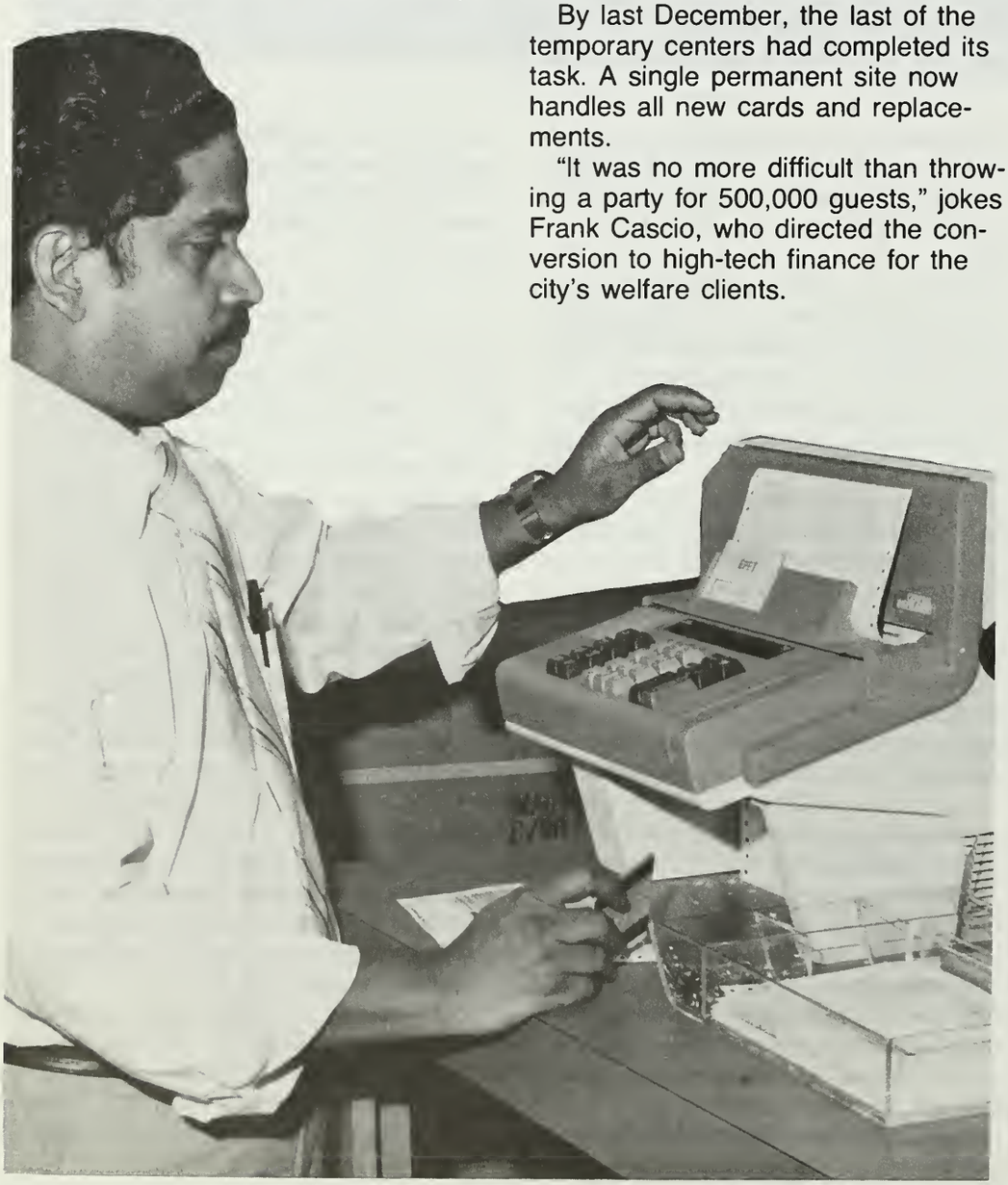
article by Jane Mattern Vachon
photos by Marian Wig, Tino Serrano, and Mary Jane Getlinger

New York City Pleased with New Payment System

Last year, officials of New York City's Department of Income Maintenance issued new photo identification cards to every public assistance and food stamp recipient in New York City. It was the last step in switching from paper documents and manual operations to one of the nation's most automated payment systems, known as Electronic Payment File Transfer (EPFT).

Under the new system, magnetically encoded photo ID cards give bank tellers immediate access to a master file of computerized records that show the amount of food stamps due each client. This eliminates the need for authorization-to-participate (ATP) cards, which clients previously used to obtain their food stamps.

"We disburse public assistance payments and food stamp coupons to more than 500,000 households," says Al Giove, manager of the EPFT system. "It took years of planning and testing to design a system that would meet our needs. The result is a savings of $9 million a year in costs and losses and better service for our clients."



Helped clients with the change

Attention to the human factor is a key aspect of the city's achievement. In automating the system, officials looked for an efficient way to prepare clients to understand and deal with it. The method chosen was to open, staff and equip five temporary "conversion" centers in Brooklyn, the Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan.

By last December, the last of the temporary centers had completed its task. A single permanent site now handles all new cards and replacements.

"It was no more difficult than throwing a party for 500,000 guests," jokes Frank Cascio, who directed the conversion to high-tech finance for the city's welfare clients.

On a blustery day last November, Cascio watched a file of clients, bundled in overcoats, step up to the window at the Brooklyn conversion center where they received training and new identification cards. Cascio visited the centers frequently to make sure clients were moving rapidly through the process.

With conversion nearly completed, the lines at the reception windows were short. At each window, a receptionist verified appointments and checked the status of the client's case on an EPFT terminal.

Those approved for processing were given a routing slip to guide them through each step, pamphlets in Spanish and English describing EPFT, and a calendar of dates on which benefits could be picked up. As clerks encoded and laminated their photo ID's and entered data into the EPFT system, clients watched a 15-minute videotape describing electronic payments.

Because an estimated 35 to 40 percent of the clients are Spanish-speaking, the tape was offered in Spanish as well as English. Entitled "What EPFT Can Do For You," it explained how the new system prevents benefits from being delayed, stolen, or lost in the mail.

It also showed how to present the card for payment at participating banks and check-cashing sites and explained what to do in case the cards were lost or stolen.

Transition made without problems

To convert to the new system, the Department of Income Maintenance assigned clients to centers according to zip code areas. Thus, the changeover took place in orderly stages rather than through simultaneous action citywide. As staff in the neighborhood offices observed the new system in operation, they were eager to come on board.

When a conversion center was ready, the Department sent out letters asking all clients in designated zip code areas to report to their assigned site. Each was given a specific date and time, and every effort was made to ensure that everyone came in.

Those who did not show were personally contacted. Files of elderly and disabled persons were flagged so they would continue to receive benefits until a special team could work with them at home.

In addition to Spanish-language materials, training sessions were provided in other languages such as Vietnamese, Laotian, and Cambodian. In one case, volunteers contacted the center and arranged to act as interpreters for a group of clients from Chinatown.

"We staffed and equipped the centers to handle about 600 clients a day," says Cascio. "Before they opened, I inspected each site and made recommendations to ensure that client flow progressed logically from one step of the process to the next.

"I thought something would have to go wrong, but I was a pessimist," he says. "The plan worked beautifully, and we made the change without a problem."

At a Brooklyn conversion center, food stamp recipients watch a videotape on electronic payments. *Below:* Frank Cascio watches a staff member encode a photo card.

Process is fast and convenient

There are currently 350 banks and check cashers throughout the city authorized to issue food stamps to clients presenting photo ID's. The process is fast and simple for tellers and food stamp recipients alike.

The teller first checks to see that the photo matches, then inserts the card into a terminal. In less than 15 seconds, the machine prints out a voucher showing the client's food stamp entitlement and the next date to report for benefits.

The client signs the voucher as receipt for payment. The teller compares the client's signature to that on the card, and pays the amount due. The computer automatically updates a master file to reflect the payment, making it impossible to get the same benefit at any other outlet.

Each night, the Department of Income Maintenance receives a tape of transactions. "It's a clean and neat system," says Al Giove.

With clients and issuance sites successfully incorporated into the new system, city food stamp managers are beginning to reap the benefits of a long planning process.

According to Giove, automation was recognized very early as the way to achieve a more secure, reliable, and economical public assistance program. He credits leadership in this effort to the vision and support of deputy administrator Martin Burdick, executive deputy administrator Herb Rosenzweig, and former assistant deputy administrator Robin Swank.

With their support, Giove's team worked with contractors to define the Department's needs and to develop an appropriate management system. From November 1981 to November 1983, the current system was tested in a small area of upper West Side Manhattan.

The results of the pilot project were carefully analyzed. A survey showed that 90 percent of the clients who participated preferred the electronic system to the paper one it replaced. They were pleased to get their benefits on time and not have to worry about having them lost or stolen in the mail.

Improvements seen in several areas

By studying the operation and results of this initial application, Department officials continued to improve the system. For instance, when the project expanded citywide, the larger volume of transactions made it cost-effective to switch from a dial-up mode of access to the master file to the faster, leased direct line.

The system was also refined to make it more reliable. A back-up computer was added to take over if the main system fails. The Department also maintains its capability for printing checks and ATP's.

With the system in place, the Department has been able to correct the formidable problems incurred under a paper system. Giove cites the following three main areas of improvement:

Administrative expense. Before automating, the Department had to pay postage on the 600,000 food

stamp ATP's and 1 million public assistance checks it mailed out. Moreover, printing and storing the documents was costly, and additional costs were involved in moving them by armored cars from the warehouse to the data processing center to the post office.

Mail loss and delays. Each month 15,000 people, including 7,000 food stamp recipients, would complain of not receiving their benefits. A complex system was necessary to guard against fraud before benefits could be reissued.

Among other things, this involved setting an 8-day limit on the time in which an ATP could be cashed. The anti-fraud measures were costly to the Department, and the delays in replacing benefits created hardships for clients. Because there is no ATP to be lost or delayed under EPFT, food stamps may be collected until the end of the month in which they are issued, which is far more convenient for clients.

All clients are given a hotline number to report the loss or theft of their ID card. This immediately prevents any further use of the card. Thus, the EPFT system virtually solves the costly problem of duplicate issuances and theft.

Accountability. Under the old system, it took 100 people to manually reconcile food stamp benefits issued and paid and to submit a monthly report to Washington. Now, payments are recorded and reconciled immediately. Staff freed from manual operations are being reassigned to provide better and more rapid service to clients.

That, Giove says, is one of the aspects he likes best about the new system. "It's always a challenge to improve management and save money," he says, "but it is also gratifying to see these same actions translated into better service to people in need."

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article and photos
by Wini Scheffler

Model System For Smaller Counties Tested In Minnesota

"User-friendly" is what food stamp staff in Dakota County, Minnesota, are calling their new automated system. The system, developed jointly by federal, state, and local staff, is especially designed to handle food stamp certification and issuance transactions in small to medium-sized counties.

"It's a great system," says Pam Nolan, computer consultant for the Dakota County Economic Assistance Division. "It does a lot for both workers and managers, and it improves accountability."

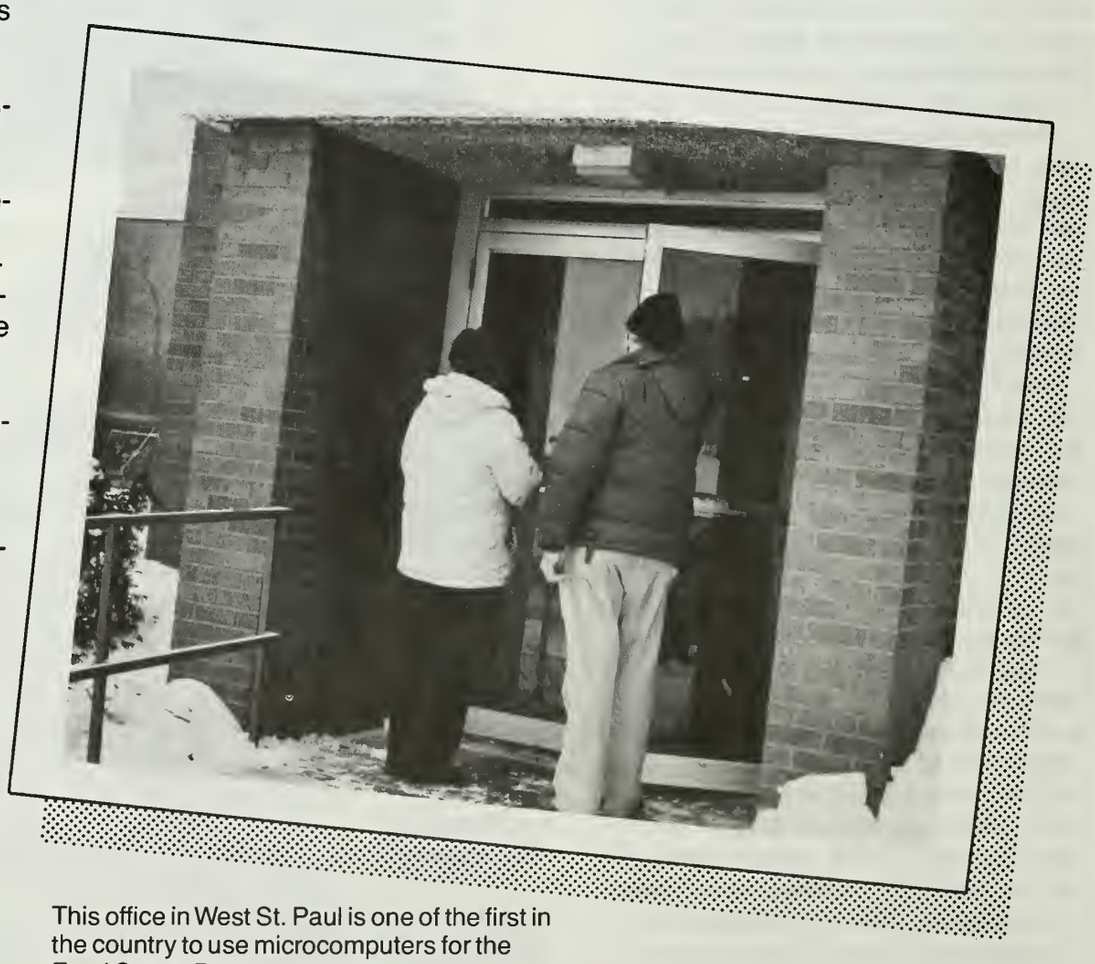
Planning began 3 years ago

Planning for the system began in 1982 when the Food and Nutrition Service's Washington staff asked the agency's Midwest regional office (MWRO) to develop and test the possibility of implementing an automated food stamp system on a microcomputer.

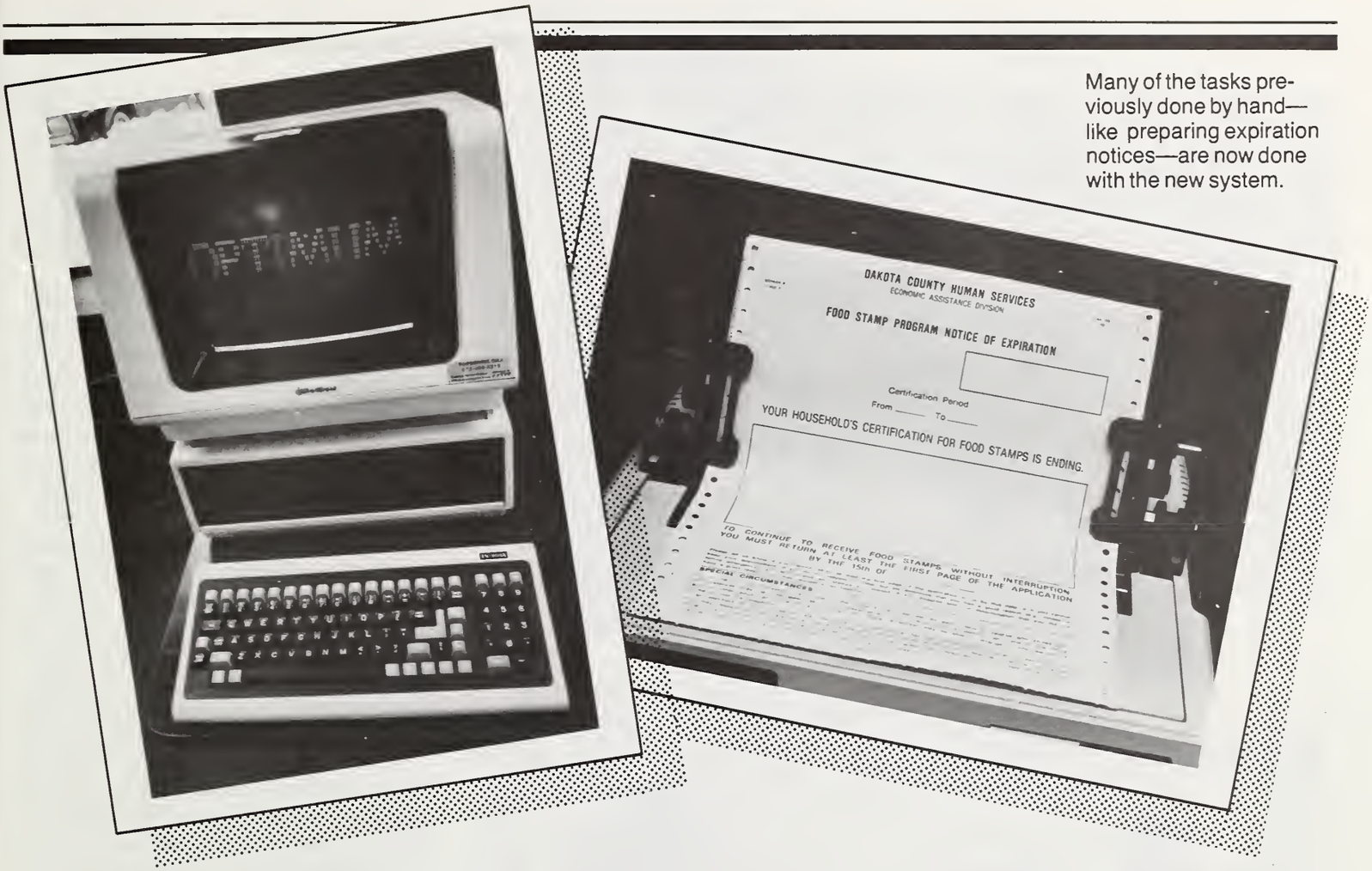
"We chose Minnesota," says Dave Witt, assistant director of family nutrition programs for MWRO, "because they do not have a statewide automated system for certification and issuance of food stamps. The Minnesota state agency agreed with the idea and chose the Dakota County Economic Assistance Division in West St. Paul as the test site."

Fred Martinowsky, computer specialist with FNS' Information Resources Management Division in Washington, was the project leader. It was his job to search for suitable software—that is to find a database management system that would operate on a microcomputer and that could do multiple tasks using multiple stations.

"This was the first time anyone had tried using microcomputers for the Food Stamp Program," says Martinowsky. "A number of automated systems are being used for food stamp certification and issuance, but these generally are in areas with large caseloads or are statewide operations.



This office in West St. Paul is one of the first in the country to use microcomputers for the Food Stamp Program.



Many of the tasks previously done by hand—like preparing expiration notices—are now done with the new system.

"There are a number of states that are county-oriented and could use smaller, less expensive systems. Microcomputers cost about 1/20 the amount needed for a mainframe system."

It took Martinowsky 6 months to research and select a database management system. He had to study market surveys, make telephone calls, talk to salesmen and visit some existing mainframe systems. He chose "OPTIMUM" because it would allow several operators to do different tasks at the same time.

Implemented in several stages

In June of 1983, Jeff Tripodi, computer programmer for MWRO, volunteered to work on the overall system design and the detailed programming. Having worked in the Food Stamp Program for 3 years, he had both the skills and the knowledge of program regulations to generate the required output documents.

Computer consultant Pam Nolan, a former Dakota County employee, was instrumental in developing the system. She and Tripodi decided what information would be put in the computer, how the information would be manipulated, and what reports would be generated. They also wrote the user manual.

When the county decided to implement the system, Nolan prepared small group training sessions for Dakota County staff to give an overview of the system and provide information on the input and output documents. She plans to conduct additional training sessions as the need arises.

Martinowsky and Tripodi did the detailed programming, after first mastering the "OPTIMUM" language. The computer system called for approximately 100 program modules.

"Writing the modules was a long, detailed process that involved taking a goal or objective and breaking it down into minute steps to reach the end result," Tripodi explains.

Speeds processing and reporting

The Dakota County system is designed to handle most major food stamp certification and issuance transactions for a maximum of 2,500 cases. As Tripodi explains, the system helps the food stamp staff with almost every step of determining eligibility, calculating benefits, and keeping track of household participation in the program.

"In the area of certification," he says, "the new system can distinguish among new applications, reapplications, recertifications, desk reviews, and corrections.

"For households that are eligible, the system can figure out the proper food stamp allotment, create a household record for storage and retrieval on the automated database, and issue a notice of decision.

"It can also generate listings authorizing the proper issuance of food stamps on both a daily and monthly basis, store all information previously maintained on Household Issuance Record (HIR) cards, and meet state and federal reporting requirements.

"Finally, it can generate statistical reports and notices based on information stored on the database. Its potential in this area is considerable."

Special form used for data

In processing applications or updating records, food stamp staff use what is called a "turn-around document." This two-part form is divided into five major sections: household, income, shelter, allotment, and household members. Areas involving allotment calculations are highlighted.

"During either an interview or a desk review," says Nolan, "the financial worker ensures that the food stamp application, the household report form or the change report form

are complete and that all verification requirements have been met.

"The worker transfers information from the food stamp application to the food stamp case information turn-around document. In the instance of an update, the financial worker uses the monthly report form to revise a turn-around that already exists for that case."

The worker keeps the bottom portion of the turn-around document and sends the top portion to the data entry operator, who keys the information into the terminal. This information either establishes a new household record or updates an existing record.

The system generates a new turn-around document and a notice of decision, which become part of the case file. Another copy of the notice of decision goes to the client, with all standard information pertaining to clients' rights and responsibilities printed on the reverse side.

Issuance log produced daily

At the end of the day, the system produces a mail issuance log, which lists the household's name, address, benefit amount, and coupon book denomination. This goes to the accounting department, which will use it the following day to manually issue food stamps.

After the accounting staff issue the coupons, they key the date, the amount, and the category of issuance (monthly, prorated, supplemental, restored, replacement, or retroactive benefit) into the terminal. This updates the household record.

The system is designed to accommodate expedited payments to households that qualify for this special service because of severe need. "In these cases," says Nolan, "the system will print a notice of decision while the recipient waits. The recipient can take his notice of decision to the accounting department and pick up his first food stamps immediately."

Speed and accuracy are two big pluses for the new system, according to county managers. "Our cases are consistent and accurate," says Judy Bergevin, a Dakota County office services supervisor, "because all the information is provided in a standard format, and the calculations are done by computer."

"It will be just wonderful when it is in full operation," says financial assistance supervisor Betty Bruber. "Definitely, it will be a timesaver.

"Although it may take longer to process first-time cases, our case documentation will be much more complete and desk reviews or updates will require less than half the time it takes with the manual system. Our computer forms are designed to get the right answers, so our level of errors is reduced."

Final tests are nearly complete

The system is now in the second stage of what's called "parallel testing." In the first stage, 100 cases were loaded and processed both manually and by computer. Many problems were worked out. In the second stage, 500 cases are being processed both manually and by computer. Dakota County staff expect their automated system to be completely in place by the end of April.

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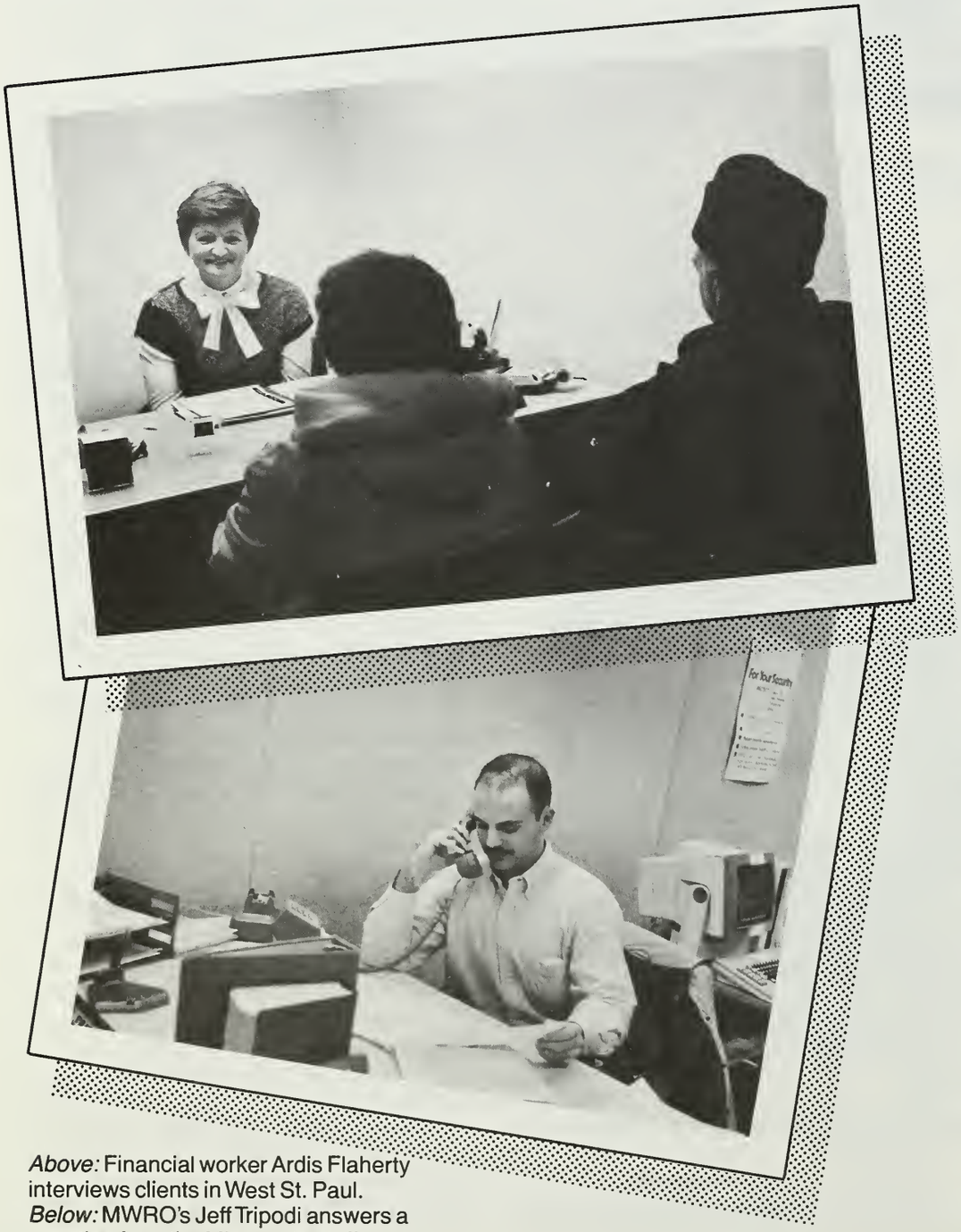
article by Mary Jane Getlinger
photos by Mary Jane Getlinger and Mary Jo Stauner



Above: Financial worker Ardis Flaherty interviews clients in West St. Paul.
Below: MWRO's Jeff Tripodi answers a question from the Minnesota staff.

Wyoming WIC Staff Pioneer New Approach

The new portable computers cut down on waiting time for mothers and children.

Although Wyoming was the fiftieth state to join the WIC program, it has become a pioneer in computerizing program operations. Working closely with local staff, state managers have developed the first on-line computer data bank system specifically for WIC needs.

WIC—officially known as the Special Supplemental Food Program for Women, Infants, and Children—is operated by state and local health agencies in cooperation with USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS).

It serves low-income pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children up to age 5 who are determined to be at risk because of nutrition-related health problems and inadequate diet. Participants receive nutrition education along with specially prescribed food packages.

Wyoming has served more than 33,000 mothers and children since the program began there. "That's very good in a state with less than half a million people," says Wyoming's WIC director Terry Williams.

System's benefits already evident

Williams—under whose guidance the new computer system was developed—sees multiple benefits already accruing from the system, including an estimated $20,000 annual savings in operating costs. Within a 3-year period, the system will pay for itself. It also serves participants more efficiently and has added to the skills of the professional and paraprofessional staff.

"We're always looking for ways to increase efficiency and stretch our dollars," Williams says. "We decided computerizing offered the most potential to help us maximize our program."

Wyoming's first task was determining cost-effectiveness. There are WIC clinics all over the state—in public health departments, mobile trailers, and even a church basement. The largest clinic is open 5 days a week, but staff members travel to smaller clinics at some sites just once or twice a month.

"Our nutritionist in the Big Horn Basin, for example," Williams says, "runs about four clinics a week at a minimum of three different locations."

The old way of doing things was cumbersome and time-consuming. Local staff used various multi-part forms to record data on each participant and each visit. These forms had to be mailed to the state office, where the data then had to be keypunched, put on a disk, and taken to the bank for entry into its mainframe computer.

The bank prepared the vouchers that participants use to purchase WIC foods at authorized grocery stores. These were done in batches and sent to the state office, which passed them on to the local agencies for distribution to participants.

Turn-around time was as long as 2 months. At least 15 percent of the vouchers had to be voided because participants had moved or their food prescriptions had changed. About 5 to 8 percent of the records had form or keypunch errors, causing more delays.

Portable units were recommended

Interested in streamlining the process, the state staff consulted their data processing bank, American National Bank in Cheyenne, which recommended using portable computers. With portable computers, the local staff would be able not only to speed certification and simplify record-keeping, but also issue vouchers on the spot.

Because of the way Wyoming's WIC program is set up, the portable units had to meet several criteria. They had to be light, so nurses and nutritionists could carry them. They had to be durable, since they would be loaded into the back seat of a car and taken from clinic to clinic several times a week, and they had to be IBM-compatible to interface with Wyoming's existing equipment.

The state selected COMPAQ portable units, which weigh only 33 pounds. Most of the state's 13 WIC projects and 32 clinics sites use the standard COMPAQ portable, but projects in Cheyenne, Casper, and Fremont County/Riverton/Lander use COMPAQ PLUS units because of their need for expanded storage capacity.

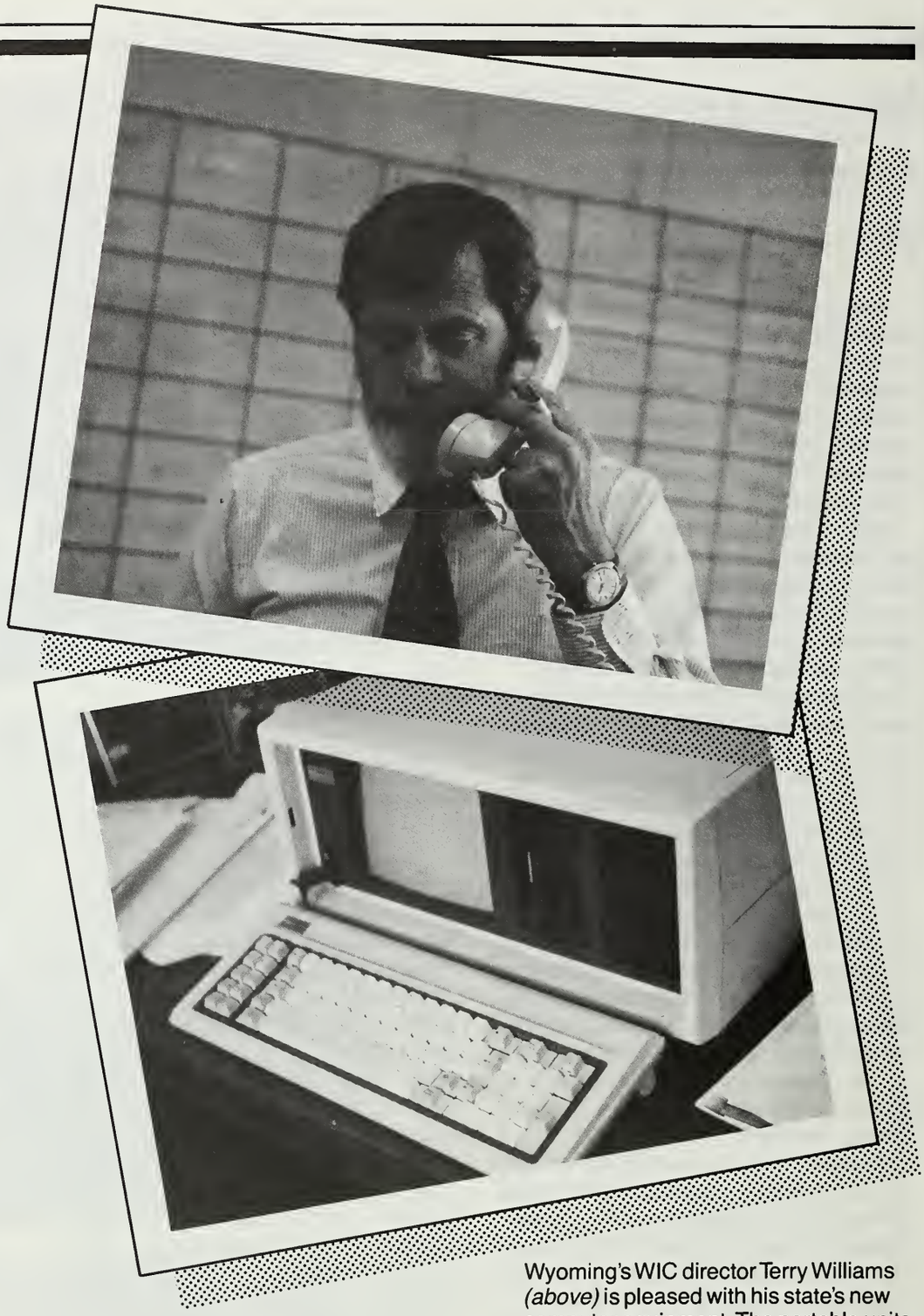
Costs were less than estimated

The hardware and software for Wyoming's system cost less than $100,000. The system came in at less than the estimated cost, thanks to a drop in the cost of microcomputer equipment over the period of the project.

Ten standard COMPAQ portables, three COMPAQ PLUS units, and another unit at the contract bank cost $55,124. This compares well with the original 3-year, lease-to-buy estimate of $55,044 for only 11 projects. State office equipment was projected at $14,850, but cost only $9,160. Programming—including the time of a full-time contract programmer—added another $18,115.

Installation costs were also low. The computers are secured in specially designed desk cabinets, constructed of heavy wood with two locks and storage for vouchers and computer paper. The state's carpenter built the first one from a staff design, and local agencies have contracted for more at $250 each.

After each workday, computer equipment is locked into the cabinet, but it remains "live" so data can be automatically forwarded to or received from Cheyenne.



Wyoming's WIC director Terry Williams *(above)* is pleased with his state's new computer equipment. The portable units are light and easy for staff to use.

Computers help in many ways

The computers help the local staff with many tasks formerly done by hand. In addition to using the units to issue vouchers and certify and recertify participants, local agencies also use the units to: correct participants' records; select food package prescriptions; enter information directly into the state's master file; transfer information from the master file; and print out data when written materials are needed.

Daily reports—including numbers of individuals certified and recertified, changes, and vouchers issued—help the state staff measure work load, calculate obligations, and monitor local agencies.

The new system also improves efficiency by reducing the amount of time participants spend in the clinics and by providing tighter control measures. The new automated voucher issuance system is a big time saver—vendor-specific vouchers can be prepared and printed at any time. Terminals can also be programmed to prepare postcards informing participants of their status.

A new programming phase will include software to issue late voucher pick-up notices, recertification notices, and right-to-fair-hearing letters. Eventually, it can also be used for word processing, diet analysis, and other office uses.

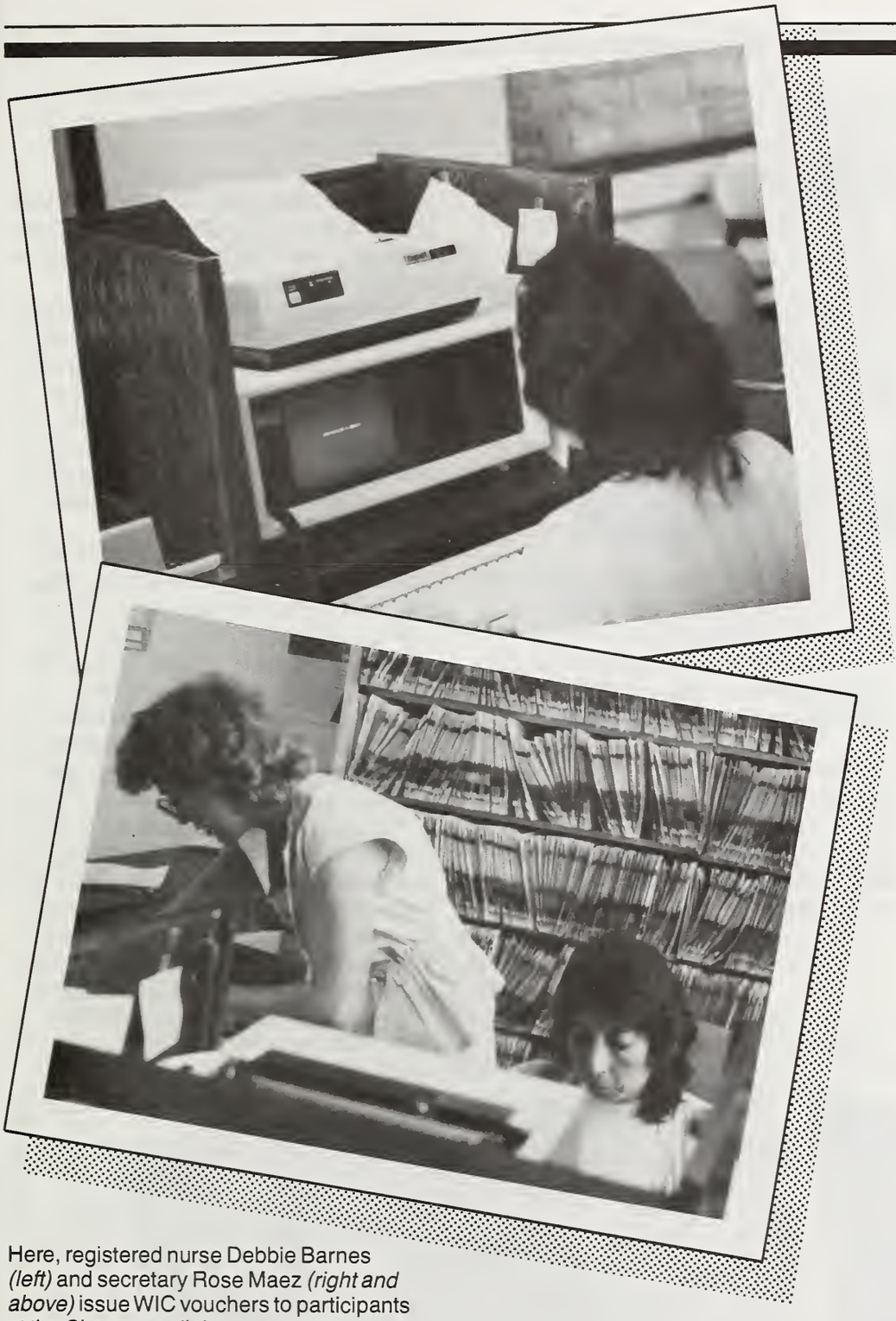
Portables units have a built-in Hayes modem and use Hayes software for communication. The COMPAQ is linked to a Burroughs 2930 mainframe computer at the bank and to the State's IBM PC-XT, using a software package called Masterlink. Each local agency project area has its own Okidata printer for on-site voucher issuance.

Clients and staff benefit

When floods in Cheyenne put their COMPAQ PLUS unit down for a day, the manual issuance of checks was a reminder of "the bad old days" for Lynn Van Raden, Laramie County nutritionist in charge of that clinic. She said they'd never be able to serve their present workload on an ongoing basis without computerization.

In terms of dollars and cents, Wyoming has reduced its banking costs already. Prior to adoption of the new system, bank charges for data support and voucher handling were $85,000 per year for approximately 7,400 participants—an average cost of 96 cents per participant per month.

This year's contract with American National calls for an expenditure of $65,000, representing roughly 73



Here, registered nurse Debbie Barnes *(left)* and secretary Rose Maez *(right and above)* issue WIC vouchers to participants at the Cheyenne clinic.

cents for participant per month.

"We're providing better service to our participants," says Williams. "There are fewer wrong checks being provided."

An added advantage is enhanced job skills for professional and paraprofessional staff. Since WIC is the state's first program in the public health sector to be computerized, county staff feel good about acquiring related job skills. They now have more flexibility for future career development and upward mobility.

Formerly, nurses and nutritionists had to do a tremendous amount of paperwork. With recordkeeping and check preparation now automated, they're free of those chores.

"This has allowed us to reemphasize why we hired them," says Williams. "We figure it gives them an additional 5 minutes per participant for counseling, education, nutritional assessment, and actual eye contact."

New staffing patterns tried

Wyoming is now experimenting with different staffing patterns within the program. Traditionally, the clinic teamed a nutritionist, a nurse, and a secretary to work with participants. Now there are two models at work.

In the first, the nutritionist provides full service to participants with secretarial support only 1 day per week to process data from the microcomputer and generate print-outs. This pattern works well with sparse populations since the nutritionist can cover several communities per week.

In the second model, which applies to larger communities and caseloads, a nurse and nutritionist work together, with 1 day for the secretary to process data gathered the other 4 days.

Wyoming is especially proud of having computerized its WIC program within the available federal grants. No special money was made available for the project. The bank trained state office staff, and state people trained field staff.

"Even though none of our people had computer expertise," Williams says, "they have been trained to fully use the COMPAQ for our program needs in about 12 hours."

He says that any local agency considering such a system is not looking at a large economic investment. A smaller agency, such as an Indian agency, should be able to implement something similar for a lot less. And a new staff person—at the end of 2 days' training—can go out and operate a clinic.

Changes can still be made

Should Wyoming ever decide to go to a totally in-house system or use another contractor or bank, the software is adaptable. But Wyoming staff are pretty happy with their new system now.

"Computers have enabled us to make our operation virtually paperless, freeing up our professional staff for more meaningful work," Williams says.

After all, why bury people in paper?

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article and photos by Joanne Widner

Workshops Help School Lunch Managers in Pennsylvania

Jack Koser brags about the fact he spends 90 percent of his workday in school cafeterias. What else, you might ask, would a school food service director be doing?

"Paperwork," says Koser. "There's just so much recordkeeping in this business that it can keep you from where you really should be—in the lunchroom finding out what does and doesn't work with the kids."

The way out of the paperwork dilemma, he says, requires neither a staff of thousands nor Merlin the Magician. It takes a little knowledge of computers and a willingness to try new things.

Koser, who is school food service director for the Lower Merion School District in Pennsylvania, became fascinated by computers and their application in the food service industry when he worked at the University of Pennsylvania.

Software was available at the Ivy League school that could instantly precost banquets, automatically develop recipe measurements for meals for from 5 to 5,000 people, and accurately keep inventory of every food service item from paper products to condiments.

When he left Penn for a career in school food service, Koser was determined to have as much computer sophistication as he could working for him.

"With the knowledge I brought with me, I could see that school food service, as a profession, was years behind in the use of computers," the district director says. "And I felt we all needed to get more involved."

Workshops offer chance to help

The chance to share this technical knowledge with his peers came last year when he was asked to assist with a series of workshops on computers sponsored by USDA and the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

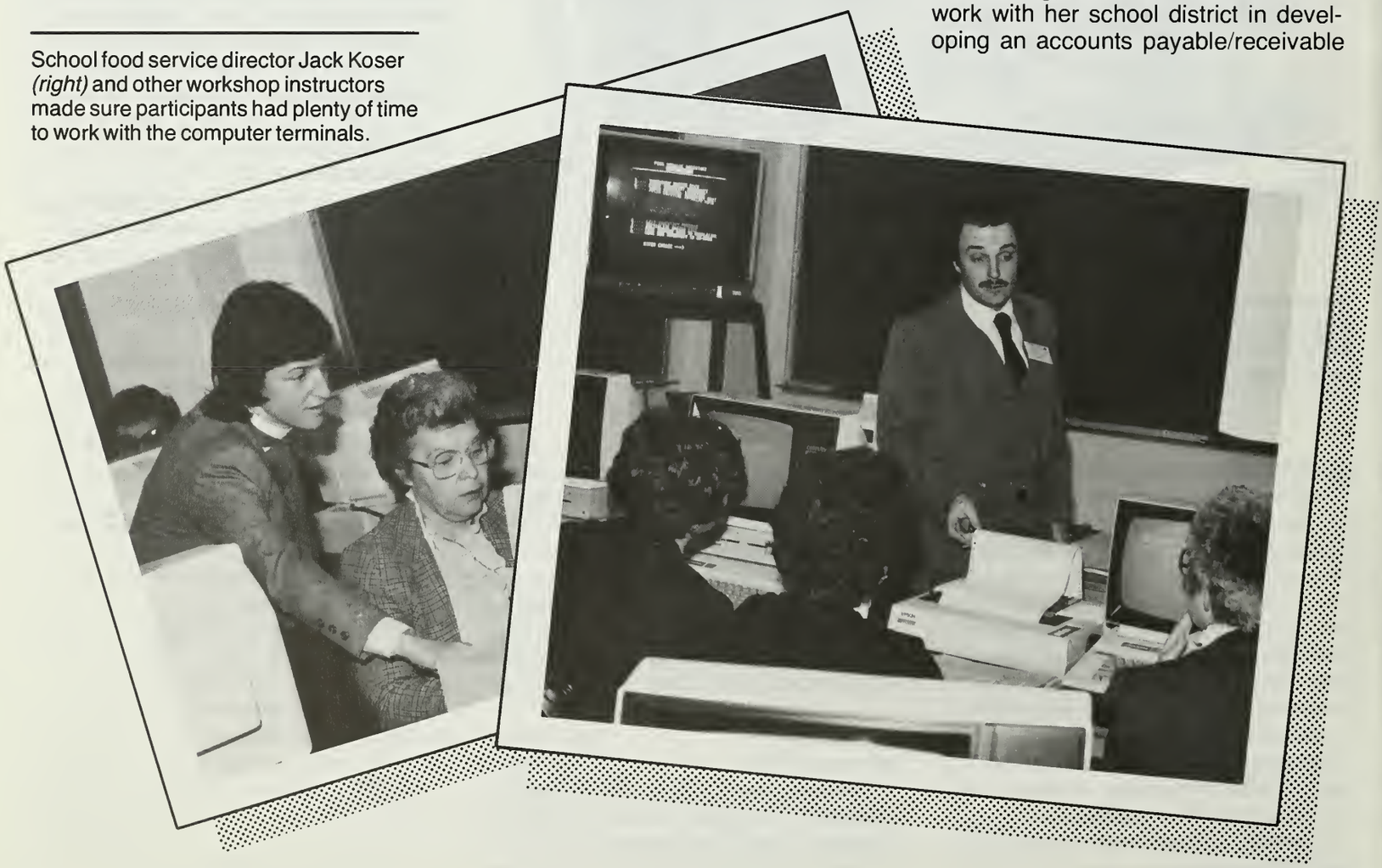
"The state wanted to get more schools involved in computers," Koser says. "It was a great opportunity not only for me but for all who were able to take advantage of the courses."

According to teachers and students alike, the workshops were an unqualified success. The sessions were both basic in design and relative to the needs of the participants. Small classes allowed for hands-on training, and software included programs for menu management, financial statements, and inventory control.

The combination maintained interest not only through the course, but also when students returned to their schools.

Betty Bass, school food service director for the Lackawanna Trail School District in the northeastern part of the state, says she had little computer training before taking the course.

"Once we got our hands on the computer and saw it wouldn't bite," she says, "I think the whole class found it quite easy to learn." Since the training, Bass has been able to work with her school district in developing an accounts payable/receivable



School food service director Jack Koser *(right)* and other workshop instructors made sure participants had plenty of time to work with the computer terminals.

system on the district's main computer.

"With the disks from the course, I'll be able to do a lot more when I get my own terminal," she says. "And with the time I save, I'll be able to get to my five buildings more often."

Other managers also see benefits

Irene Metzger, food service director at the Loyalsock Township School District in Williamsport, says while some of the course programs were inappropriate for her small district, she found the training to be a great asset.

"It really hit the target," she says. "I'd recommend it for anyone in school food service."

After taking the course, the Williamsport director was able to get an inventory program for government commodities written for her district. "I went to the computer teacher about putting together a program, but he couldn't work in any free time," Metzger says. "So he made it a student assignment." The program is now in place and saves her 1 day's manual work a month.

One director who bought the computer concept lock, stock, and barrel was Ed Gordon, head of food service at the Bensalem Township School District in suburban Philadelphia.

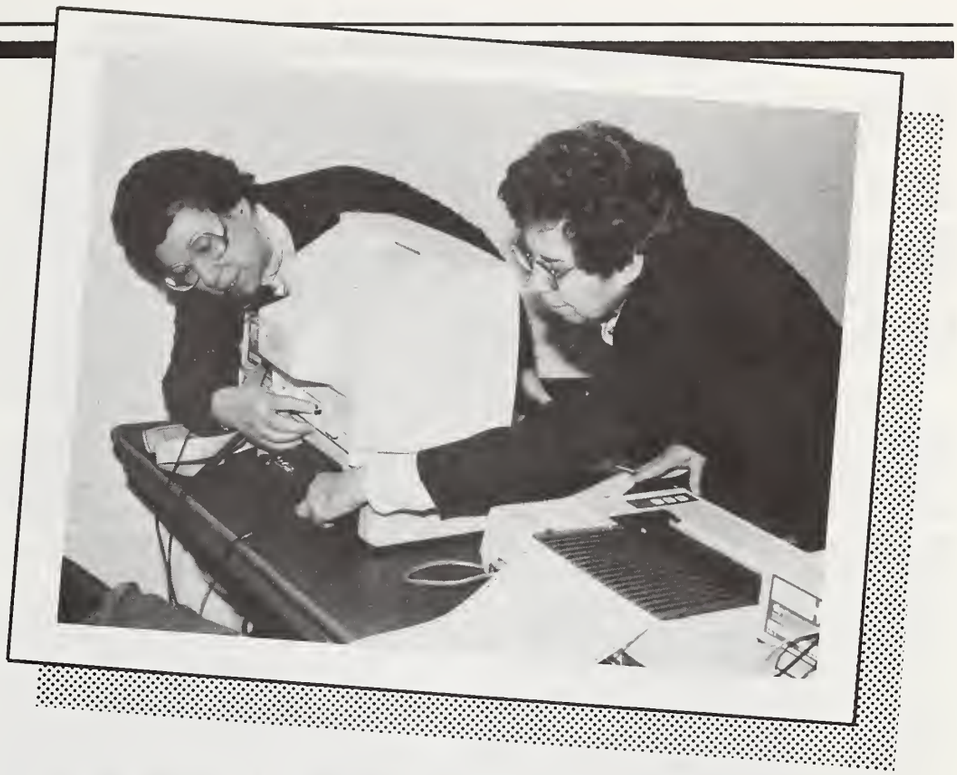
"I'm sold," he says. "I've got a PC (personal computer) here in my office. And, I've bought an entire food service software package along with 16 hours of training time."

Gradually, Gordon says, he is bringing all facets of his operation into the electronic age. And the effort is paying dividends.

"Last summer, it took me 4 weeks to build an inventory file of about 800 items," he says. "Before the school year is half over, I'll easily make that time back."

Another computer time saver, Gordon has found, is in the area of the daily accounting of meals and money and periodic tabulations. "I used to have a journal that required writing in numbers each day for each school," he says. "With the computer, it's much quicker and cleaner, and you don't have to worry about errors in the totals."

Gordon credits the workshops with fueling his interest in computer technology. "I think what did it was the fact that the course dealt specifically with areas we could relate to," he says. "The people who put the workshops together came up with a good concept."



Workshops were carefully planned

Penn State University's College of Human Development was awarded the contract for the three 2-day sessions, entitled "Using Computers to Improve School Food Service Management."

The purpose of the workshops, according to Carolyn Lambert, assistant professor in Penn State's Food Systems Administration, was to acquaint school food service personnel and business officials with the computer and its application in their workplace.

She says most managers in business administration are in need of computer knowledge. School food service is a good example of a profession that must use, reuse, and store large quantities of information.

"The computer would appear to be such a logical purchase that every school food service department would have one," the professor says. But many school districts do not use electronic technology in school food service.

"In some cases, there is a reluctance to try new systems," she explains. "And there are many times when people are willing but the training is either too technical or inappropriate."

The premise of the Penn State workshops was that participants had little or no knowledge of computers or their application to the school lunch program.

Sessions held in three locations

Sessions were held in three locations—eastern, western, and central sections of the state. They were limited to 50 people per session so that everyone could have enough personal attention from instructors as well as time working with the computer.

"We had less lecture time and more participation with the terminal," Koser says. "People quickly became more at ease and less apprehensive."

Another key ingredient to the success of the workshops was the instructional software that consisted of programs specific to food service operations—inventory, daily cost sheets, and a recipe file. These programs were given to participants in diskettes ready to use.

Koser says he hopes the workshops and the programs will serve as a base that will eventually lead to such things as inventories, cost analyses, financial data, recipes and nutrient evaluations being generated instantly by computers.

"The workshops got the awareness to 150 people," he says. "It's a start."

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article and photos
by Joe Dunphy

School Lunch in Gainesville: From Cash Box to Computer

For many people in Gainesville, Florida, GATORS means only one thing—the University of Florida sports teams. But for school lunch managers, GATORS means Gainesville Automated Terminal Online Resource System, a state-of-the-art computer project that spells relief from paperwork while providing improved accountability for the school lunch program.

In 1981, the Alachua County school board decided to make better and more extensive use of computers throughout the 30-school district. County food service director, Bronna Godwin, who has recently retired, welcomed the chance to modernize school lunch operations.

"In looking at our business systems," says Godwin, "we realized they were old fashioned and unreliable." All monies for the school breakfast and lunch programs were collected in tin cash boxes and participation counts were tallied as hash marks on a form.

"We had a totally manual system. We knew we needed a change because we were handling more money than many companies in the area. We were running a $5 million business out of tin boxes."

Special terminals installed in schools

The first area Godwin addressed was cash collection and accountability for meals served. "Accurate meal counts are important," she says, "because they determine federal reimbursements." After reviewing a study on how to best use available computer technology, she decided to install point-of-sale cash register terminals in each of the 30 schools.

As Godwin explains, the terminals are placed at the end of the food line like ordinary cash registers. As children move through the line, the cashier at the terminal keys in information on the sale—for example, whether the meal is served free, at reduced-price, or at full price to students. Information on a la carte sales and meals served to adults is also keyed in.

Each terminal has a modem attached, which allows the terminal to communicate through a separate, direct phone line to a host mainframe computer located at the school board office. The food service staff and school board accountants view data from the schools on terminals that are linked to the mainframe.

Many chain restaurants use this same type of setup since it provides accurate accounting at the point of sale with appropriate checks and balances for cash collection.

A computer program, developed as a part of GATORS, transfers data from the schools' terminals to the mainframe host computer. The mainframe computer "polls" each school terminal at night through a telecommunications software program that retrieves data on school lunch activities that day.

System is fast and accurate

Electronic polling improves accuracy over manual keypunching since data is punched in only once at the point of sale. And it is faster—it would take one person almost 8 hours to keypunch one day's data that is now transmitted from all schools in less than an hour over phone lines.

If there is a telephone transmission problem with a school, data can be keypunched into the mainframe computer. While this takes longer than telephone transmission, it is still much faster than the old manual system.

Persuading lunch managers to change to a new computerized cash collection system wasn't easy. "I had managers break out in hives during computer training because they were used to their tin boxes and forms," laughs Godwin.

In the first year, there was a fear of dealing with technology. "The managers were initially worried about the in-

Five years ago, Alachua County schools were using tin cash boxes, like this one, to collect school lunch monies. Thanks to Bronna Godwin, all 30 schools now have sophisticated computerized cash registers.

stant feedback we had on their school lunch data the next morning," says Godwin. But due to the proper atmosphere and support, the GATORS system has been accepted well. "Now you can't find anyone who would even think about going back to the old system," Godwin says.

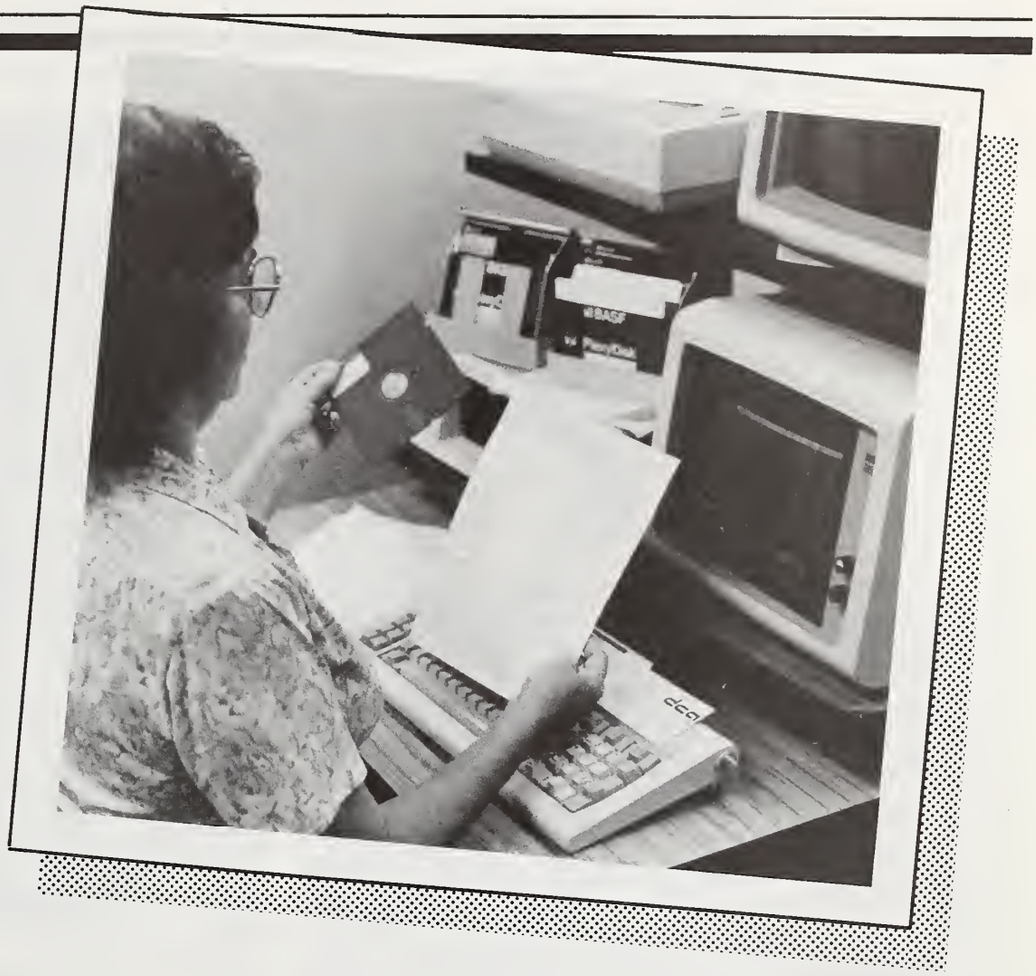
One of the benefits of GATORS is that managers now have more time for food and employee supervision rather than duplication of clerical work. In Gainesville, school lunch managers can save up to 6 hours a week of their time and almost 3 hours of their employees' time a week.

At one school, 30 forms a week have been eliminated thanks to automation. USDA's Office of Inspector General audited GATORS and found that it was effective in gathering and summarizing school lunch data.

"The terminals also help speed students through the lunch lines since item costs are programmed right in," says Godwin.

Even though the GATORS computer network is extremely sophisticated, the key to its success is the simplicity, accountability and flexibility built in. Most schools use only one terminal. "We put an additional terminal in a school only if it is needed due to an additional food line," Godwin explains.

Lunch data from the secondary terminal at a school is punched into the primary register at the end of the lunch period. All data is stored in the primary register until the host computer polls it that night.



Reports help managers plan

As a part of GATORS, management reports that include information on participation, food costs, and labor costs are provided to each school manager. This enables school lunch managers to compare their costs with other schools' costs and to evaluate ways to better manage their programs.

"We want each school food manager to see how much labor and food cost is involved with the meal. With this information, we're challenged to see if we can do it for less," says Godwin.

Management reports also help managers evaluate the expense involved in sophisticated kitchen equipment. "I think managers would be less prone to want some of the bells and whistles on equipment if they were aware there is a direct charge back to their programs.

"We want them to ask whether we should pay for the bells and whistles or put this money back into higher quality food for the students. There are many decisions that can be made and attitudes than can be adjusted based on the information that our reports provide," says Godwin.

GATORS works with the system each school has in place to protect the identity of those students who receive free and reduced-price meals, about 50 percent of those served in Alachua County.

Cashiers identify the type of meal by a code on meal tickets or roster of students. "We want the food service program to be a satisfying and positive part of the school day. We don't want anyone to feel different," says Godwin.

For paid lunches, Godwin encourages students to prepay by offering a discount if at least five meals are paid in advance. "Parents have picked up on this incentive, which helps us plan our food needs better while saving students money," she says.

One way Godwin keeps cost to a minimum is the use of USDA-donated commodities. "We use all the USDA commodities that we can since it can really cut our costs. I encourage my managers to be innovative in utilizing the donated foods," she says.

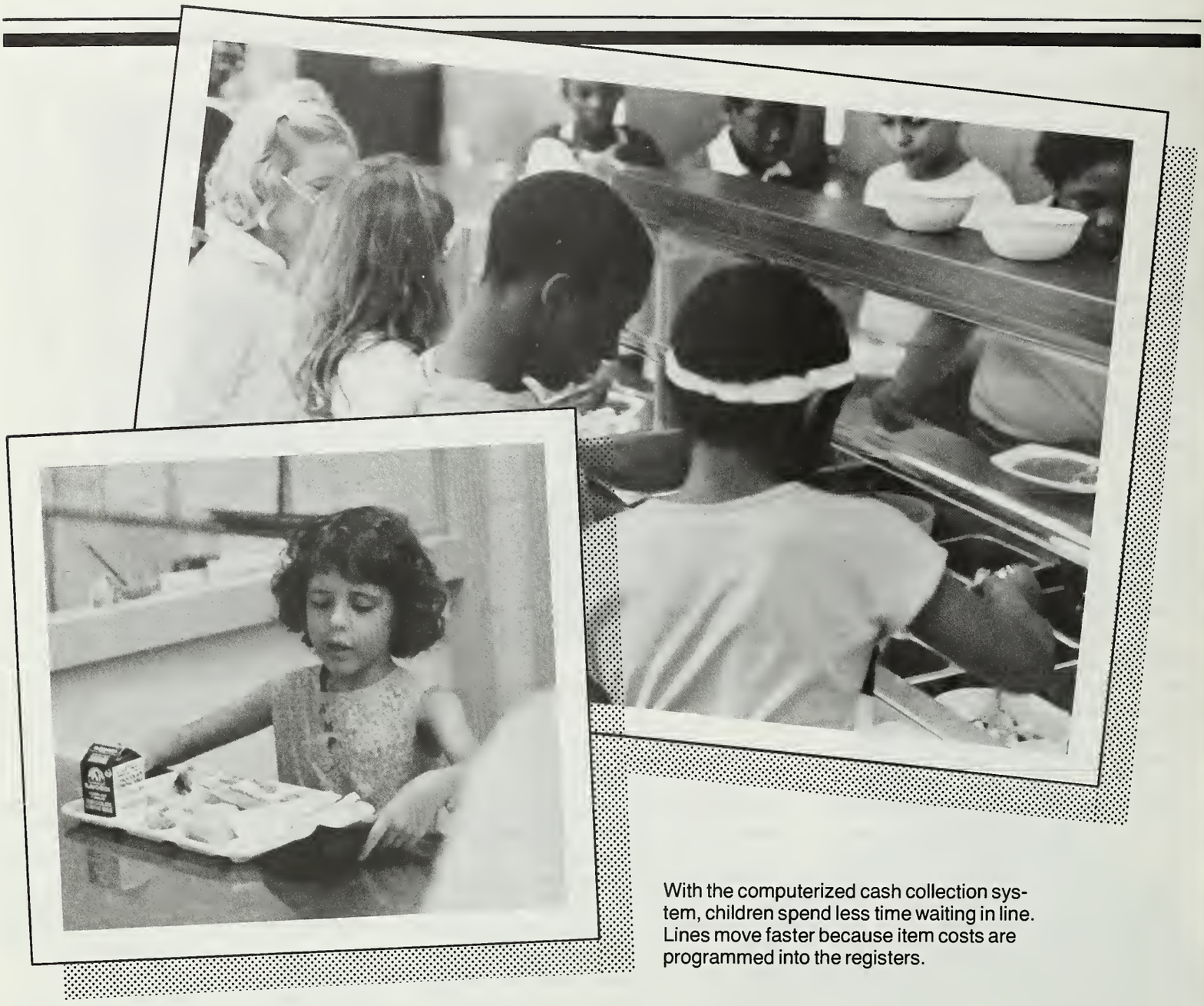
The county has computerized the inventory of USDA commodities, making it easy for lunch managers to keep track of what foods they're using, what they have on hand, and what they need to order.

The change was worth the effort

From the start, Godwin was convinced that computerizing the lunch program was worth the effort and financial commitment it required. The county had the option of buying or leasing the computer equipment. They decided to buy the terminals for the schools—postponing some kitchen equipment purchases to pay for them—and lease the telephone modems.

"We wanted to show the school lunch managers our commitment to this project through our purchase of the terminals," says Godwin. "When you lease computer equipment, people sometimes think that it will be replaced or taken out if problems come up. We were dedicated to changing to the best technology available."

In deciding how to automate their lunch programs, Godwin suggests



With the computerized cash collection system, children spend less time waiting in line. Lines move faster because item costs are programmed into the registers.

schools evaluate their needs carefully. "A system has to fit the needs of people and the priorities of that particular location," she says. Due to the expense involved in changing to computers, a system like GATORS may be best suited for those school districts that need to automate or have obsolete equipment.

Before automating her own program, Godwin spent time looking into how computers were helping other food service people. She feels school lunch managers can learn a lot from private industry.

"We have to look at what people in private industry—for instance the fast food chains—have developed for inventories and sales to see if that is a need we have," she says.

County program is now a model

Harold Blanton, state food and nutrition director, is encouraging other Florida districts to adopt the GATORS system. "We are hopeful that many school systems will take advantage of this technology. At this time, around 15 counties plan to use all or part of the model," says Blanton.

Among the school systems that are implementing or are interested in GATORS are Dade County (Miami), Duval County (Jacksonville), and in Georgia, Atlanta. Alachua County staff have held a number of seminars on GATORS technology for other school districts.

GATORS is part of FIRN (Florida Information Resource Network) that will link all Florida school districts, universities, and the state education office later this year. This will allow computers to transfer funds for school food service throughout the state.

Alachua County is already sending school lunch participation reports to the state office through FIRN, which allows quicker reimbursement of funds.

GATORS has given Gainesville a more effective school lunch program today. Tomorrow it may be a management information system that is used in school lunch programs throughout the country.

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article and photos by Kent Taylor

Statewide Network Simplifies School Lunch Management In Maryland

In Maryland, a new statewide computer network is making life easier for school lunch managers. The network links the state education agency, which administers the National School Lunch Program, with every school district in the state.

Now, instead of having to prepare long and complicated written reports for reimbursement and other purposes, school staff simply key the information into the computer terminal installed in their offices and send it electronically to the state office.

Maryland is one of the first states in the country to go full steam ahead in setting up a total network of technological communications with its local education authorities (LEA's).

Managers like the new system

Preliminary work on the system began in 1981 when the state contracted with the Center for Educational Research and Development at the University of Maryland to design, develop, and test an automated data processing system for both the child nutrition and commodity distribution programs.

In 1983, the state won approval from FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office to spend $166,000 in state administrative expense funds on the project. Within a year, there was a computer network between the state and all 24 school districts. Schools have not only welcomed the computer equipment installed by the state, they have also added to it with purchases that increase their computer capabilities.

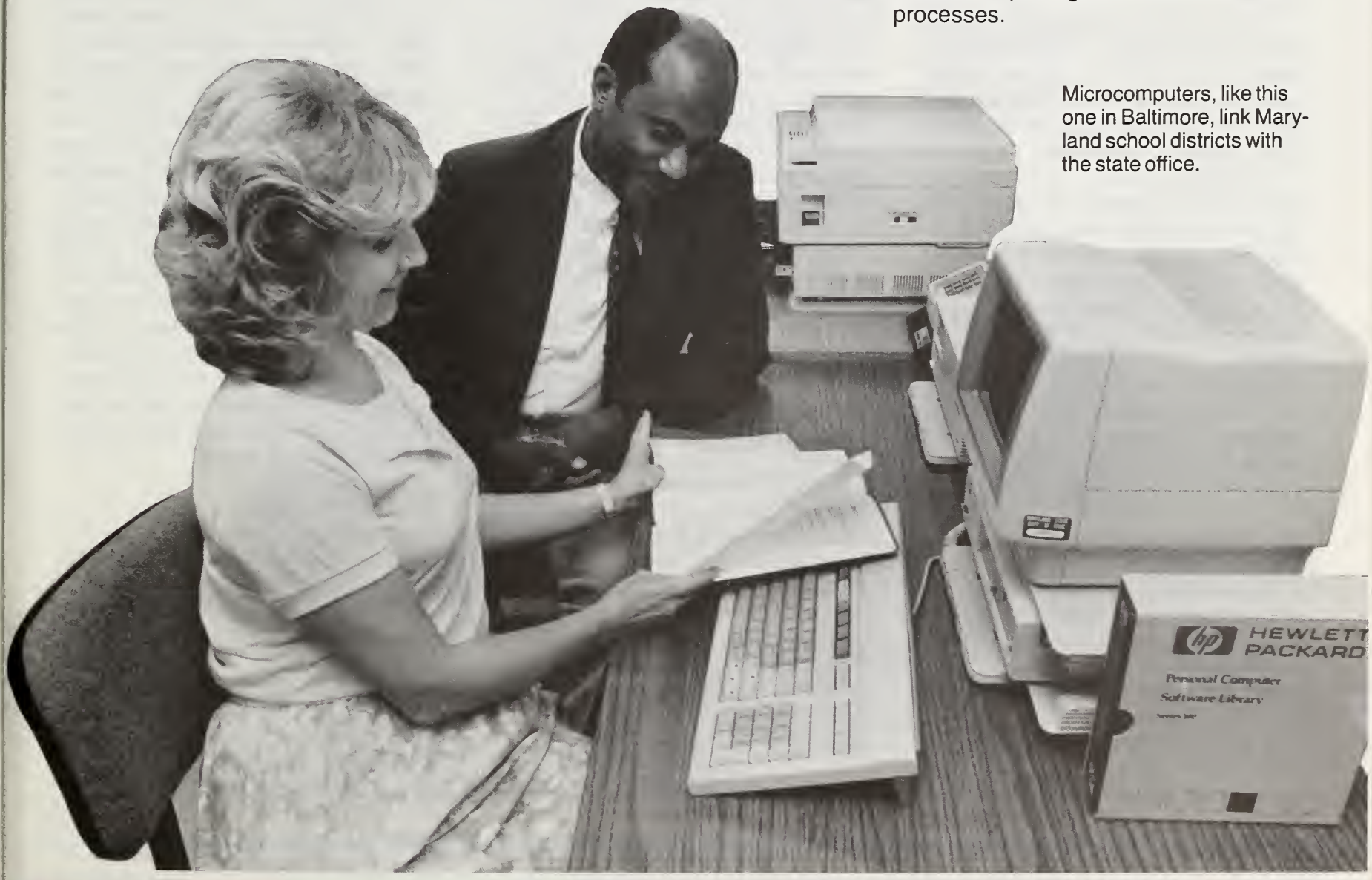
Joan Weatherholtz, who directs the education support service branch for the state department of education, is sold on the new system. "It has greatly simplified communications," she says, "enabling the state agency to gather and process information quickly and accurately."

According to Robert Cliser, chief of accountability for the branch, the system is also saving money. In the first 6 months of 1985, the computer network saved the state approximately $200,000.

Cliser was convinced from the start that the system would be cost effective and that it would answer an urgent need to improve reporting procedures at both the state and LEA levels.

Developed in several stages

The state is now through its first phase of completion. The principal uses of the system have been to: establish and update data bases of standard information for items such as routine reports; to provide for a rapid exchange of information; and to facilitate reporting and reimbursement processes.



Microcomputers, like this one in Baltimore, link Maryland school districts with the state office.

Among the specific items processed for the child nutrition programs are program agreements with boards of education, overall information on schools and on student applications for free and reduced-price meals, and pertinent information on severe need schools.

The data processing system is used to process requests from LEA's to the state for payment on letters of credit; produce statistical reports for reimbursement; prepare semi-annual financial reports to establish per-meal costs; and monitor operating balances. It also helps make projections used for planning and budgeting.

As Cliser points out, the turnaround time for an LEA's request for payment by the state on a letter of credit used to be about 5 to 8 days. With the computer system, this has been reduced to about 2 days. The turn-around time for sponsors to receive claims payments based on monthly statistical reimbursements has been cut from a maximum of 8 weeks to about 2 weeks, since this report, as well as others, is being automatically edited instead of manually checked.

Information on the commodity program has also been computerized, making it easier for program managers to determine the availability and value of USDA-donated foods and to order bonus commodities.

"This year, phase two is being implemented," Weatherholtz says. "The branch is working with the LEA's to establish an electronic mail system and to develop a program that will replace hands-on processing of applications for free and reduced-price meals."

During the third phase of the project, this year and next, there will be additional programs developed to improve the management of local school food service operations.

Many advantages for local staff

Local school food service managers are benefiting from the system in a number of ways. Stanley Smith, director of school food services for Baltimore County, says he finds the system particularly helpful in submitting routine reports and retrieving information in the proper format.

Baltimore County, which has 146 schools, has expanded the system to set up programs for equipment inventory. "Instead of locating information manually," Smith says, "we now can rapidly retrieve the most specific information, such as how many stoves or kettles there are in any kitchen or what the model numbers are on the ovens." The district's add-ons to date have cost about $5,000.

Don Trumble, director of school food services for Washington County's 42 schools in western Maryland, calls the system "indispensable" and praises the speed and efficiency it provides in handling repetitive tasks.

An example is the county's report on summer school food service. "It used to be difficult to get it out to the state by September 15," he says, "but now we get it out by September 3."

Getting commodities is faster as well. Trumble says he can now order bonus commodities on a screen and have them within approximately 10 days. "Before the system went into operation," he explains, "it took 3 to 5 weeks to process an order." This involved querying the state, waiting for the state to determine if it had the food, then going through the tedious paperwork that was needed. Saving time with these orders is critical in menu planning.

Trumble is pleased with the way the state staff has helped the LEA's put their systems into operation. "They're going at a very rapid rate," he says. "With the electronic mail system established in August, you can leave a message for anyone on the network."

Like Baltimore County, Washington County has added to the basic system. Trumble is especially proud of the plotter machine, which has total graphic capabilities. The additions to the system, including a word processing package, have cost Washington County $4,000.

County and state staff are quick to agree that the costs of automating are worth the results. For a relatively small investment, they've made some big improvements in their programs.

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article by Ellen Lancaster
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Special Project in West Virginia Links State And Federal Offices

Like Maryland, West Virginia is leading the way in automating school lunch program management. In this case, however, the electronic link is between the state department of education and FNS' Mid-Atlantic regional office (MARO) in Trenton, New Jersey.

Working with MARO's financial management staff in a project begun in 1984, West Virginia has automated at the state level all claims reporting for the National School Lunch Program. Claims, requests for payment, and a report known as "FNS-10" (*Report of School Programs Operations*) are now processed with a new computer system developed by MARO.

Prior to completion of this project, state staff manually entered data from local school food authorities on individual spread sheets and processed claims, requests for payment, and reports with pencil, paper, and desk calculator. This was both time consuming and error prone.

"The new system really saves time," says Diane Hill, who has had 8 years of experience preparing these reports in the department of education's internal finance office. "It provides more accurate figures and calculates reimbursements automatically, eliminating math errors."

Information sent via phone hook-up

As the system is set up, monthly data from the 55 county offices and 110 private schools and residential centers is entered into the computer at the state level. The computer generates the FNS-10 report, transmits it by a special telephone hook-up to another computer at the regional office, and updates the state's individual school claims records. It also generates the paperwork needed to reimburse schools for meals served to participating children.

The computer at the regional office generates a printed copy of the FNS-10. Information submitted on it is later verified during routine financial reviews conducted by regional office staff.

Receiving the information electronically saves a great deal of time for the FNS regional office as well as the state. A big advantage for MARO staff is that they do not have to re-key the information into their cash management analysis system. This analysis is used by the region's financial management staff to project funding needs.

Representatives from MARO and West Virginia worked together on setting up the new system, which will serve as a model for other states. Both agencies realized that many of the potential users were inexperienced with computers and that setting up an initial system that was too technical could turn what was once just a manual reporting headache into an electronic nightmare.

For this reason, they kept the system as simple and non-disruptive to current operations as possible. As MARO systems analyst Dennis Martko says, "The major difference between the manual system and the automated system we proposed was that the information would be viewed on a computer screen and people would no longer be working with volumes of paper."

The basic system developed can easily be enhanced as the state agency becomes more proficient in using it.

Also automating in other ways

West Virginia is interested in automating claims processing at the county level and would eventually like to have data entered at the school level. "We are excited about the potential of the system," says Faith Gravenmier, state director of child nutrition programs for West Virginia, "and everyone involved has a positive attitude. In fact, some county offices have already volunteered to pilot test data entry at the county level."

This would provide for complete automation of the system. Staff time and resources needed to produce the monthly reports would all be reduced. Reports could be transmitted in a matter of minutes to the state office and from there, consolidated FNS-10 reports could be prepared and transmitted to the regional office, without having to re-enter the data at the state level.

The next report scheduled for automation at the state level is FNS-44, a report on the Child Care Food Program submitted monthly to the regional office. Other food program reports that may be automated in the future include the quarterly financial status report, and reports required for the state's food stamp and WIC programs.

MARO's immediate goal is to have all states in the region using paperless reporting for the child care and school food programs by the end of 1986 or early 1987. This will involve sharing with other states the technology developed in West Virginia.

Eventual link to Washington

MARO is also working with FNS headquarters staff to connect the regional office directly to Washington, eliminating the need to re-key reports received via computer from state agencies. This will allow complete automation of the reporting process from the state to the region to the national office.

At every step in the process, paperless reporting eliminates opportunities for errors. It also saves staff time, paper, and filing space.

As Ron Koushel, MARO's director of financial management, says, paperless reporting will eventually make "hard copy" reporting obsolete. West Virginia's new system is a big step in that direction.

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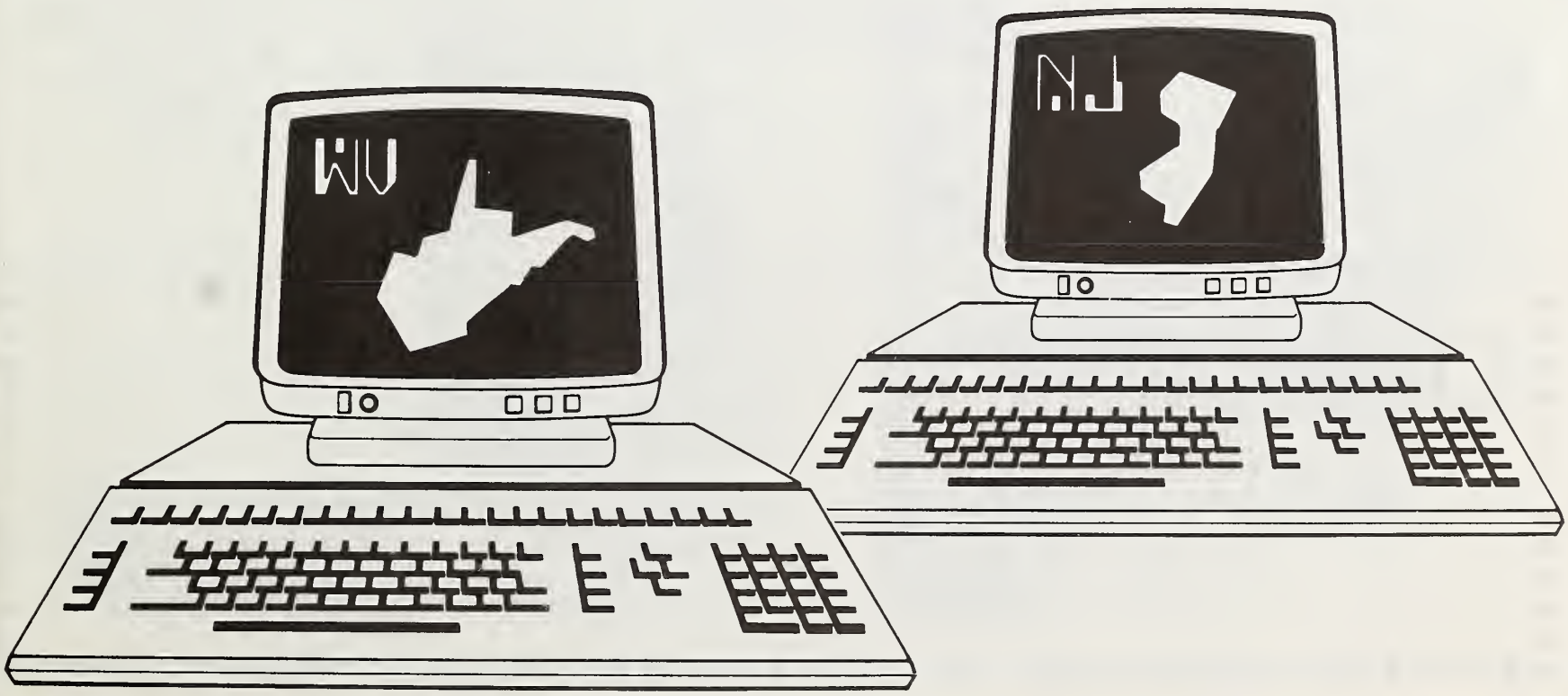

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